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Paul Witcover

### A Metaphor for the Multiverse *Mother London* by Michael Moorcock

New York: Crown Harmony, 1989; \$18.95 hc; 512 pages  
New York: Harper & Row, 1989; \$8.95 tp; 496 pages

*Mother London*, Michael Moorcock's 100th novel, appeared on these shores more than two years ago. Not once in that time has the novel received the critical attention in science fiction circles that is Moorcock's rightful due. This piece is a belated but sincere attempt to remedy that situation.

The critical silence is all the more puzzling because while *Mother London* may not be the greatest sf novel ever written, it is the greatest novel yet written by an sf writer. To read *Mother London* is to encounter an authentic work of genius meticulously and lovingly crafted by a master at the height of his powers.

Never before has Moorcock written with such bold assurance and grace; never before has the complex architecture of his fictional (indeed, science-fictional) strategies seemed so beautifully organic and necessary, so right; never before have his characters come so fully and triumphantly alive. Although Moorcock has occasionally reached this high level before, he has never sustained it over the length of a major work until now.

It is as if his entire career has been spent in preparation for *Mother London*, learning how to write it. Here the author's central concerns—though linked to his usual themes of time and characters, freedom and destiny, good and evil—are grander and more daring, presented with a profound regard for, and sympathetic understanding of, the human condition. And while one's appreciation of *Mother London* is greatly enhanced by a familiarity with sf—especially in the "Moorcockian" sense—the book's real pedigree goes back directly through James Joyce to Charles Dickens; it derives from the Anglo-Irish branch of an old and thriving European literary tradition.

*Mother London* is important not only on its own terms but as an indicator of the precipitous and by now almost total decline into literary irrelevance of category science fiction. I lay particular stress upon the word "irrelevance," for while there is still plenty of good and even daring science fiction being written, this writing has become increasingly marginal in terms of influence not only outside the genre but within it as well. Under the dominance of what will be defined below as the American market and of an editorship and readership suffering from the effects of prolonged inbreeding, a tradition once vital and influential has been allowed and even encouraged to grow moribund, parochial and reactionary. The sad truth is that much of science fiction has lost whatever claim it may once have had or hoped to have as a vital and enduring force in the creation of serious literature—which despite these leveling times I hold as a worthwhile, indeed the only worthwhile, aim of ambitious writing.

The roots of science fiction can be traced to such seminal works as *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, works whose essential inward focus—though achieved through a symbolic use of and conflict between science and Nature, the individual will (in its Romantic sense) and destiny—I take as representative of what I referred to earlier in this essay as the European literary tradition. This tradition

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Paul Witcover celebrates Michael Moorcock's centennial in London  
Arthur Byron Cover phases out The Movement  
Gene Wolfe mourns Sharon Baker  
Rob Killheffer storymongers Frank Robinson  
Gwyneth Jones and John Clute on two Yankees

Plus spiders, dreams, rings, Banks and the longest lettercolumn in our three full years

Arthur Byron Cover

### Just a Phase We're Going Through *Splatterpunks: Extreme Horror* edited by Paul M. Sammon

New York: St. Martin's, 1991; \$14.95 tp; 346 pages

Artists rebel in order to seek beauty as a means to discover truth. Yet some artists rebel against beauty itself and seek to discover truth in ugliness, sifting through the shit of the world, cataloguing evil and unpleasantness in all their forms, peeling away the psychic layers of both the individual and society in general until they reach the surface of the unfathomable, unspeakable, and certainly the unmentionable—polite-society essence at the core.

At least that's the romantic ideal of some artists. And, frankly, I can think of few writers who would mind having an impact on the soul of the world in ways similar to the hits achieved by Nijinsky, Picasso, Stravinsky, de Kooning, Ernst, and Buñuel, all of whom, at one time or another, found truth and beauty in ugliness. Unfortunately, most artists who openly aspire to such an ideal are poseurs who have compromised their romantic goals, almost before they have begun, with the more pragmatic goal of meeting (what they believe to be) the pre-conceived expectations of their audience.

But the modern audience for horror fiction expects a certain amount of ugliness in its entertainment, indeed, it seeks to wallow in it. (Whether or not this is because the audience hopes to find truth and beauty in horror, or needs a little bit of ugliness in order to achieve a legitimate cathartic experience—or is simply composed of cynical, insensitive folks who like sick jokes—is somewhat beyond the scope of this essay.) This expectation is very difficult to meet, if for no reason other than the fact that the reader knows the author's intent to elicit a few chills, and the experienced horror reader thinks *All right, go on, try to scare me—if you can.*

In other words, the reader's very knowledge that he is searching for a predictable emotional response is, in and of itself, his greatest defense against it, and the biggest barrier the author must overcome. The power

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# XENOCIDE



## Praise for ENDER'S GAME :

"Intense is the word for Orson Scott Card's ENDER'S GAME...[an] affecting novel full of surprises." —*New York Times*

"Both a gripping tale of adventure in space and a scathing indictment of the militaristic mind." —*Library Journal*

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## Praise for SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD :

"Told with compassion and keen insight...Highly recommended." —*Library Journal*

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"SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD is complex, both in historical perspective and story line. The intricate relationships between the main characters are an integral part of the tale. Card draws us into their lives, giving us insight into their thoughts and feelings and getting us involved in the twists and turns of this very intimate story. It is a great read." —*U.P.I.*

"There aren't too many recent sf novels we can confidently call truly moral works, but SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD is one...A completely gripping story." —*Toronto Star*

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of the emotional response explains the strengths of the horror tale when it succeeds, and of course explains its weaknesses when it fails. A bad horror story is simply too predictable to achieve the desired emotional response. Because of this, the average horror story is not obligated to reply on any conventional setting or intellectual conventions, and the genre has been set free from certain types of formulas, even as its dramatic structure, generally, tends to be as rigid as that of a Shakespearean or well-made play.

Perhaps most importantly, the philosophical underpinnings of the tale, if any, must be nothing less than a full-fledged assault on everything the society of the reader, if not the reader himself, holds dear. This can't be said about an sf story in the *Assouling* tradition, for instance, which insists that in the end mankind is just the sort of biped the universe has been searching for to restore law, order, and transcendental wisdom to a lawless and chaotic situation. Nor can it be said about a mystery, wherein a detective, either amateur or professional, restores order to society after a crime has been committed. Indeed, the subtext of horror is that there is no order to be found, that the hold of man's society over reality is naught but an illusion in the pipedream of a subconscious nightmare, that there are things in nature—if not above nature—out to get us. The only transcendental wisdom to be found is in surviving.

And in its attitude toward surviving and the survivors, every horror story worth speaking of implies a certain moral order, or lack of it, to the universe. This was true when Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, Lewis wrote *The Monk*, Stoker wrote *Dracula*, Lovecraft wrote *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and King wrote *The Stand*. In each of these novels, characters engage in life-or-death struggles against settings that mirror both the protagonists' inner states of mind and the forces that shape their world. Even stories with mere elements we may safely call horrific—such as Robert E. Howard's "The Valley of the Worm" or Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"—explore the implications of man's effort to establish order against forces of chaos which may or may not be evil, which may be only indifferent, but which nonetheless extract a terrible cost from those who struggle against them.

Seen in this light, the horror story is not the outcast of modern twentieth-century literary thinking both its leading practitioners and its stuffy academic critics have always implied, but is, in truth, perfectly in accord with the vague perimeters of traditional modern existential thinking. For just as Hemingway's characters struggled to discover a goal worthy of their hearts and minds in a universe in the main indifferent to the society of man, so too did the introverted scholars of Lovecraft's Cthulhu tales—only H.P.'s universe was vaster, more indifferent, more chilling than that of post-World War I literature, for at least in Hemingway's universe mankind *mattered*. The whole point of Lovecraft's later work, informed as it was by the astronomical discoveries of the day, was that there are creatures greater than God, and in their eyes we are less than ants.

This was the basis of the cosmic horror Lovecraft dwelt so lovingly on in his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature." Before H.P., the Victorian ghost story, the legacy of the Gothic romance, utilized the supernatural to restore a sense of justice, of order, to the world, especially in stories wherein ghosts existed to do what the living could not. Lovecraft, in accordance with the intellectual shockwaves that ran through the arts after World War I, did away with all that restoration of justice business.

Now is of course a myth that the power of Lovecraft's writing—at least in the eyes of those who appreciate it—lies in his subtlety, and in particular his elliptical technique during scenes of grotesqueness and gore. Lovecraft was about as subtle as an ox, and while he didn't dwell on the details of blood and guts oozing all over the place, such was his single-mindedness that he ultimately left little to the reader's imagination.

Lovecraft's legacy—and his myth—permeates Paul Sammon's anthology *Spatterpunk*. Its thesis is that there's a new breed of horror writer in town, posers, and his name is Spatterpunk. In this book Sammon seeks to stitch together a group of writers who have written stories that appear to share similar aesthetic perspectives, and certainly attempt to assimilate lessons gleaned from similar sources: *Psycho* (and by extension Bloch and Hitchcock), *Twilight Zone* (plus Matheson and

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Beaumont), Stephen King, bad sci-fi and horror movies from the fifties, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, the modern slasher film, and rock and roll (as exemplified by Aerosmith, the Clash, rap, and hip/hop). To this list I would add the template of the average sf short story structure from the fifties, plus the energy and tendency toward experimentation prevalent during the New Wave period from the sixties.

But I also hasten to add (before Sammon has a chance to) that the notion of Splatterpunk attempts to be more than simply the sum of its influences. Indeed, this book reminds me of a line used in the old trailer for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for these stories at their best are "ripped from the fabric of reality." Gruesome murder, child abuse, incest, necrophilia, mindless cruelty, geeks, freaks, and thugs abound in these tales, often in unexpected or sick (in the highest intellectual connotations of the word) combinations. One comes away from these stories with feelings similar to those one gets from today's newspaper headlines: mainly that there is no security or safety this side of the grave, that if life itself doesn't get you, then some greasy thug springing at you from an alleyway will. Splatterpunk, at least as defined in this book, is anti-art in one key sense—there is little or no sense of catharsis here. In these stories, and by extension, in *this world*, the key horrors always remain, and from them there is no escape.

In the best writing here, all this is communicated with an admirable visceral exuberance and sensuality. The writers whose comments are recorded in this book all profess to be horrified by the random existential violence of real life, and, like them, I think their stories record some kind of ineffectual protest against the inhumanity of modern society. Even so, they record their visions with all the tenderness and loving care of an opium dreamer of hardcore blood and violence. A little of it, I'm afraid, goes a long way. In the final analysis, the frankness of Splatterpunk doesn't represent an artistic innovation so much as it does yet another wrinkle in the traditional horror story. Ultimately Splatterpunk still exists in Lovecraft's amoral universe where the only sanctity lies in survival.

The stories themselves are strictly of the hit-and-miss variety, and usually are, structurally, no different from the traditional horror story. A few might have natural act breaks à la *The Twilight Zone*, but I would hardly call that an artistic innovation. Joe Lansdale's famous "Night They Missed the Horror Show" leads off the book; in it a few unlikely, ignorant rednecks get offed, pretty much for random reasons, by a few unlikely but worldly-wise rednecks for whom random murder is a way of teaching people a lesson. The story is a well-done exercise but wasn't especially horrific for me because no one in it really mattered.

In another well-done exercise, Ed Bryant's "While She Was Out," a young lady takes a respite from her dreary home life, goes shopping, and finds her not-inconsiderable survival skills tested by a bunch of thugs. Here, Bryant's craftsmanship elevates what might have been a mere piece of hackwork into a textbook perfect example of the form. And in a way, that's the problem—it is, indeed, textbook perfect. It practically has tenure. It's hardly revolutionary, or even evolutionarily.

The other stories lacking fantasy or sf elements have plots every bit as minimalistic as the Lansdale and Bryant entries. The power of Roberto Lanzer's "Goodbye, Dark Love," a stand-out in Echlin's *Cursing Edge* book, depends on its surprise ending, and like most such stories, it doesn't really work the second time around. Wayne Allen Salice's "Rapid Transit" recounts a man's descent into madness after witnessing a murder from a metro car, as the details the man sees would in actuality be impossible to catch from such a distance—and at such a speed—it's difficult to note where sanity ends and the hallucination begins.

Other stories straddle the line between "realism" and fantasy, i.e., Rex Miller's unfunny shit story. Phil Nutman's "Full Throttle," John Skipp's "Film at Eleven," and Nancy Collins' "Preakent" are basically okay reads, but they don't really stick to the reader afterwards. Of the stories with more fantastic elements, Richard Christian Matheson's "Goochumps" and the infamous Chapter 18 from Ray Garton's *Crawfish Autumn* match the quality of the okay reads. George R. R. Martin's 1976 "Meathouse Man," included here as an example of proto-splatterpunk, is an effort at something different—an sf story with a surreal central image of vast scope. On a future world "corpse handlers" control dead bodies that work a planetload of factories; and, whenever they feel like it, the corpse handlers use the dead bodies as

## Things To Come

Nicholas Ruddick on the death of British science fiction.

Michael Swanwick on Ian McLeod.

James Cappel on James Blaylock

Also reviews of Gene Wolfe, Judith Merril, and Ian MacDonald, by reviewers such as Brian Stableford, Fernando Gouvêa, Gwyneth Jones, and our ever-humble staff.

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tools in puppet necrophilia. While this story is written with all the passion I expect from Martin's work, the plot, once we get to it, reveals itself a high school morality play about the typical Martin theme of unrequited love, one which he has explored to far better effect elsewhere. Not one of Martin's most memorable efforts. Upon none of the stories discussed in this paragraph would I hang the responsibility of being the cornerstones of a major artistic movement.

The real cornerstones of *Splatterpunk* are Clive Barker's "The Midnight Meat Train," "Less Than Zombie" by Douglas Winter, and "City of Angels" by J. S. Russell. The Barker is like an essay entitled "The Hero of a Thousand Abortions." It contains a great central image—that of a man riding a subway train filled with the butchered bodies of urban victims sacrificed to mysterious creatures who eat the flesh of mankind. It contains some great writing, and it attempts to scale mythic heights with its story of the mantle being passed on from one butcher to his successor. Unfortunately, it's not so much punk as it is yuppie, in that it has a bloody, K-Y surface but, philosophically, is somewhat vacuous.

The same trait is turned into a comedic advantage in Douglas Winter's "Less Than Zombie," a satire on Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* that takes place in the universe of George Romero's classic monster flick *Night of the Living Dead*. The story is a brilliant parody that made me laugh out loud several times. The story that made Sammon laugh out loud is Russell's "City of Angels," a punk EC-style revisionist look at the after-the-bomb scenario with a surreal, muted landscape that serves as the backdrop for the lowbrow shenanigans of a trio of aimless, restless, decaying youth. In stories like this the phrase slice-of-life takes on new meaning, and this one contains plotting so minimal, characterization so black that I confess I just didn't see the point until I asked *Midnight Crossfire* editor Jesse Horsting, who first bought the piece, what the big deal was, and even after he answered I wasn't too sure. In essence, Jesse's reply was the story's appeal lay in its devil-may-care, "in-your-face" attitude. Luckily for me, I try to keep my opinions closed, or covered, at all times when I'm not actually using them.

Ultimately these three cornerstone stories demonstrate that while splatterpunk may represent the latest wrinkle in the horror genre, the movement constitutes a rebellion in a straightjacket, especially considering that most of the stories occur in the same amoral, gritty, survivalist universe that Lovecraft first charted. In addition, most of the writers represented herein are clearly in the formative stages of their talents and careers, and although no young artist can be certain what the future may bring, it's no wonder that in the introductions Sammon has provided, most of the authors deny their work is exclusively focused on the narrow criteria of splatterpunk, in so far as they understand the term. It's as if they've already decided that one stage of their rebellion is over, that they would rather concentrate future efforts on more traditional searches for truth and beauty.

Indeed, *Splatterpunk* is most valuable as a chronicle of young

talents attempting to draw attention to themselves through a label without suffering the disadvantage of being typeset. What distinguishes *Splatterpunk* from other tomes recounting the dry, academic application of critical labels is Sammon's press-release-style introductions, which not only hype the editor's take on what's happening now in the horror genre, but time after time repeat the litany that while the author in question has no objections to having his over-the-top, gross-out, extreme horror reprinted in a book called *Splatterpunk*, he really has more elevated fields to sow and reap. Unlike most editor/critics stitching together an artistic movement through an anthology, Sammon regards the behind-the-scenes drama behind the book as a focal point for public debate. Indeed, few anthologies this side of Ellison are so drenched in the ego and persona of their editor, only in this case someone forgot to squeeze the manuscript to get rid of a little liquid id before the book went to press.

Conspicuous by his absence is David Schow, the young Turk who coined the phrase "splatterpunk," initially as a jab at the term "cyberpunk" (also initially a joke, uttered at a convention panel by that well-known humanist editor, Gardner Dozois). It could have been that Schow didn't think the time was right for a splatbook, or that if anybody did one, it should be Schow himself, à la Sterling's *Mirrorshades*. Although he was disappointed that Schow could not/did not want to be represented in the book, Sammon puts on the best face possible and doesn't hesitate to give Schow his due whenever it's appropriate; he praises Schow just as glowingly as he does the other important members of the Splatpack in the long essay that concludes the book, "Outlaws."

Schow's ambivalence toward *Splatterpunk* is mirrored in two products he created for his own amusement. The first was a T-shirt he and Steve Boyette gave to some friends a few years ago. On it was a pair of bloody, broken sunglasses, and the slogan read, "My blood's so bright, I have to wear shades." The T-shirt represented the positive phase of the Splat movement, when it was all a game and a good time, before it got down to the serious business of publicizing authors. For Schow did not realize that although *Splatterpunk* was on one level a satirical jab at cyberpunk, it was, simultaneously, a joke doomed to catch on and be taken seriously, because there are legitimate reasons, on strictly literary terms, for the audience to recognize that certain traits of certain products from certain writers easily fit inside a set appropriately labelled *Splatterpunk*. Schow may not have thought the time was right for a Splatpack book, but in that regard he was mistaken. Sammon's book proves it, even though it really doesn't prove that *Splatterpunk* is a successful or important evolutionary trait in the horror genre.

Schow's second, more recent product is a bumpersticker reading: "SPATTERPUNK! It's a movement; it's a way of life; it's just a phase we're going through."

I would say it's a transitional doorway many authors have arrived at, and until one finds the key to let everyone through, we won't know if the door leads to new terrain on the other side, or if it only takes us deeper into the land and morality of the Lovecraft universe. ▶

Arthur Byron Cover lives in Northridge, California.

## The Dark Beyond the Stars by Frank M. Robinson

New York: Tor Books, 1991; \$19.95 hc; 408 pages

reviewed by Robert Killheffer

Stylomongers beware: whatever its merits, Frank Robinson's latest novel leaves the conventions of language unchallenged. This is not to say that the book is poorly written—it is certainly not—but in no way does the prose follow the aging starship it describes, queuing ever outward for new forms of life. The writing remains earthbound, content in moving the engaging story along.

And engaging it is. At first glance, it appears a return to the Heinleinian "real thing," a vanishing breed of featuring vast interstellar voyages, huge spaceships, and cooperative scientific searches for knowledge. The *Astrow* is a latter-day *Enterprise*, on a limitless mission to find alien life anywhere it can. But after 2,000 years it has still found none, and its crew—reduced to living in the last third of the vessel that remains functional—despairs of ever encountering other life-forms. But the Captain, apparently immortal, is determined never to give up, and plans to head the *Astrow* into the forbidding Dark of the title: a starless void across which lies a fresh, unexplored region of worlds whereon they may yet succeed.

We are introduced to this milieu through the eyes of the young crewman Sparrow, who recalls a somewhat later tradition of the genre. Like any number of Zelazny protagonists, Sparrow suffers from amnesia, stumbling through intrigues without enough information, and only slowly recovering his identity. The tumbler shifts and shift again in the lock as Sparrow gathers data: friends become enemies become friends, truths become lies, memory becomes holographic implant.

Thus, Sparrow learns that he too is immortal, and intentionally flattered by the Captain every couple of decades to maintain his unaltered personality. He, it seems, is meant to be a baseline against which the rest of the crew can measure themselves, so they don't lose too much of their earthly traditions and behavior over the interstellar generations.

(Of course, even this underlying reality turns out a falsehood, but more than this it is not profitable to reveal.)

Beside this plot runs another more typical of the generation-ship theme: rebellion. Many of the crew are so afraid to venture across the Dark in the deteriorating *Astrow* that they are prepared to rebel, while others remain staunchly loyal to the Captain and their mission. This conflict provides Robinson ample opportunity for some interesting speculation on the possibility of alien life in the universe—the two sides debate the issue vehemently, since faith in the existence of extraterres-

trial life is the deciding factor between them. Robinson offers no new theories or interpretations, but his explication of the varying arguments for and against are solid and provocative.

From all of this Robinson's novel would seem nothing more than a good old traditional spacefaring tale, competently and even inventively handled, but not very interesting in terms of the larger realm of contemporary sf. But do not be fooled. There is much more here, the iceberg beneath the tip. Behind the rebellion plot lies another conflict which makes an intriguing commentary on the current state and direction of our world and our genre.

The traditional sf ethos sends us outward, toward adventure, discovery, danger and knowledge. Onward and upward. As in the world of *Star Trek*, the inherent value of the mission is assumed; scientific inquiry is the purpose and salvation of humankind. Aboard the *Astrow*, the Captain personifies this faith. He never seriously entertains any of Sparrow's challenges to his assumptions, secure—even smug—in his certainty that the mission can and must be accomplished no matter what. Though Sparrow is torn for some time between a desire to share the Captain's faith and his compassion for the crew, the Captain becomes an increasingly negative figure as the novel progresses, callous and contemptuous of the crew, harsh in punishment, arbitrary and threatening.

The Captain's indifference to human lives finally pushes Sparrow into the rebel camp. When he condemns the loyal crewman Tybalt (one of Sparrow's friends) as an example that he will spare no one in defense of the mission, Sparrow confronts him: "The crew will hate you," he warns, and the Captain responds:

"This crew, perhaps . . . Maybe even a few in the next crew. But to the crew after that and all those that follow, Tybalt's death will be history, no more important in the long run than his life. Or anybody's life. Every three generations, God clears the stage for a new set of actors, Sparrow" (p. 268).

To the Captain, who has watched countless generations of crew live and die while he has not aged, individual human lives are meaningless; they are "mayflies," too short-lived and expendable to count. "The crews that came after [the first] were faded copies, faces he never remembered, names he quickly forgot" (p. 375).

After this, Sparrow comes to feel that salvation instead lies on a journey inward—toward Earth, toward home, toward the self. Toward the end of the book he declares:

"An ice volcano is not the highest achievement of the universe. . . . Neither are planetary rings nor a rock sitting in the middle of a lunar plain. You and I are its highest achievements. Thrush—we can think and we can feel and we can run and play games and pick our noses. There's nothing else in the universe that can do any of those" (p. 385).

The Captain, with his dogged determination to pursue his quest, whatever the cost in human suffering, embodies the headstrong scientific tradition that inspired much of early SF (including the many ancestors of Robinson's own story). Sparrow's conclusions are a direct repudiation of that philosophy; he rejects the allure of extraterrestrial wonders, of inhuman lifeless landscapes, in favor of the mysteries and beauty of the earth itself—and of other human beings.

Our experiences as a society since the days of the Golden Age have encouraged a much more cautious attitude toward technological advancement. While it has certainly yielded many benefits, not least in medicine, it has also left us with gargantuan new problems. We have faced the ill effects of unbridled technological development, seen the dehumanizing influence it can have on us and our world—how it can replace humans with machines, kill whole cities with one blow, ruin the very air we breathe, assign us each a number. In response, there are signs of renewed urges toward simplicity, naturalism, the pleasures of home and family life. In a way, *The Dark Beyond the Stars* is part of this trend: Robinson advises us (if we can call it that) to look inward again, to recognize the value of each other and our world, to turn our attention to Earth and solving its problems before we throw ourselves headlong onto other worlds.

### Spider by Patrick McGrath

New York: Poseidon Press, 1990; \$18.95 hc; 221 pages

reviewed by Darrell Schweitzer

True!—the hero of Patrick McGrath's new novel, Dennis Cleg, a.k.a. Spider, is the direct descendant of Edgar Allan Poe's nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous narrators, but why will I say that he is mad. . . . ?

Largely because of what he tells us: that he is really two people, Spider, hiding in a hole in the back of the skull, reluctant to show his true self, and Dennis, who can pass for "normal" to a point; that he is plagued by such discomforts as the discovery that his arms and legs have suddenly become too long for his clothing, only to shrink back to size later; or that his body is rotting out, while his intestines wrap themselves around his spinal cord and his anus appears on the top of his head. Later, Spider tells us, one of his lungs has disappeared, and there is a worm living in the other one, but it seems mollified by tobacco.

This proverbially unreliable narrator returns to the East End of London after twenty years in an asylum for the criminally insane, to which he was committed for murdering his mother. But did he? We have only Spider's word for anything, and this is a man for whom lightbulbs sometimes begin to darken and crackle. *His* version is that his father, Horace Cleg, took up with a prostitute named Hilda, murdered Spider's mother, and substituted Hilda for her. We never know: does Hilda even exist? Did Spider go off the rails because of the trauma of adultery and murder, or did he somehow develop the fixation that his mother was not really his mother but a street-whore, and therefore murder her?

Ultimately, nothing is resolved. Spider moves into a boardinghouse, writes his secret diary as he sinks further into what is probably schizophrenia, and becomes convinced that his *landlady* is now Hilda the prostitute. But there is no second (or is it third?) murder. Spider finishes his book and toddles off to commit suicide.

Even if we ignore the publisher's hype about "the first postmodern-gothic storyteller," we do find that Patrick McGrath is indeed deliberately and consciously a neo-gothic writer. He is the author of a collection, *Blood and Water and Other Tales* (1988) and a previous novel, *The Grasses* (1989), and guest-editor of a special issue of the 6 The New York Review of Science Fiction

Contemporary SF has been filled with such a cautious approach to technology for some time, and it has only increased in recent years. David Brin's *Earth* and Judith Moffett's *The Ragged World* spring immediately to mind. Even William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's latest, *The Difference Engine*, though an entirely different sort of book, harbors a similar message: the invention of the computer a century earlier serves only to bring about many of our world's current problems (pollution, Orwellian government, violent class-based conflict) that much sooner. But by adopting such a hallowed framework as the interstellar generation ship, Robinson underlines his commentary, pointing to the traditions as he challenges them, and he puts an interesting extra spin on the tale at the end. While maintaining a rather negative assessment of our outward- and upward scientific urge, Robinson does not end with doomsaying—Sparrow decides the crew must return home and seek fulfillment in the wonders there, but he does not conclude that this therapeutic return must be permanent. "There would be a relaxation time," he thinks, "and then they would go out again, maybe even crossing the Dark this time. Perhaps not so much to explore as to colonize, though that was a vastly long time in the future" (p. 403). We must mature, and prove we can manage one planet before setting forth for others, but in the end we will succeed.

In this we may see a metaphor for the future of our field as well. If the Captain represents the old SF ethos—outward, upward—and Sparrow the current one—inward, homeward—then the descendants Sparrow envisions colonizing the stars are the next generation of writers, who will have inherited a greater maturity from our current retrenchment, and will be able to carry off again to the outer reaches of space.

That, I think, is profoundly to be hoped. In the meantime, Robinson has given us some of the best of both worlds—an exciting story in the grand tradition, and a healthy dose of maturity gleaned from our recent collective experience. For now, that is enough. ▶

literary magazine *Conjunctions* (Collier Books, 1989) devoted to "The New Gothic," in which he spells out his own aesthetic clearly enough:

It is with Poe that we first see the gothic shifting away from an emphasis on props and sets—dark forests and lugubrious caverns, skeletons and thunderstorms—and towards a particular sensibility characterized by transgressive tendencies and extreme distortions of perception and affect. Poe's genius lies in his recognition of the sorts of structural analogies possible between the trappings and the sensibility, then the deftness with which he splices them together: Roderick Usher's mind is as much a reflection of his house as his house is a reflection of his mind. . . . (*Conjunctions* 14, p. 239).

As the gothic shifted in the 1840s away from haunted castles and toward haunted minds, new and twisted branches of fictional possibilities began to grow. Now, a century and a half later, at the end of one of those branches, we find Poe's devoted disciple Patrick McGrath with his tale of Spider's strange shadow-world of hallucinations and tricky memories. In the afterword to that issue of *Conjunctions*, McGrath speaks of "a familiar gothic progression or tendency, the movement toward death." Thus his own novel progresses. As Spider approaches his end, the hallucinations come thick and fast. He describes himself as a corpse. Perhaps he has been dead ever since his mother died, or at least since he was committed to the asylum. He takes great and secret pleasure in hiding in the cabinet under a sink, his huge, emaciated frame wrapped around the curving pipe, lying still, as if buried. The "distortions of perception" become extreme indeed and the inner and outer realities seem to merge. We last see Spider about to ascend into the boardinghouse attic to confront the drooping, cackling, thumping demons which have tormented him throughout the book, then hang himself. So the haunted boardinghouse, which is haunted by Spider, swallows him up.

Is this a horror novel? Patrick McGrath isn't another would-be

Stephen King. His background is mainstream, literary. His stories are published, not in *Fear or Cemetery Dance*, but in *The Quarterly* and *The Missouri Review*. He demonstrates the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of a literary/mainstream writer. His prose is elegant, his imagery evocative. He is a master of the first-person form, and from the very opening paragraph has so precisely captured his narrator's unique voice that we never doubt that we are indeed inside the mind of a lunatic. But the narrative is static. Essentially nothing happens in the foreground story until the very end. Only when Spider delves into the past does the novel seem to get anywhere. More seriously, McGrath, in *Spider*, as in much of his prior work, seems a little too remote, too arch, unwilling to engage the emotions. "Make 'em laugh," a writing teacher tells his students. "Make 'em cry. Then rip their guts out. If you can do that, all else is forgiven." Spider is a pathetic, wronged character, his whole life ruined by either his own madness, his father's perfidy, or a combination of both. Yet he is curiously unsympathetic. His narrative should be

suspenseful, strange, and terrifying. Strange it is, but the reader's attention not often drifts. *Spider* occasionally dazzles, but it does not relentlessly grip.

So, a horror novel, if perhaps not as fearsome as it should be? Certainly. "The gothic," McGrath wrote in *Conjunctions*, is "an air, a tone, an atmosphere, a tendency." Today, as the horror genre seems turning away from the supernatural to embrace what, twenty years ago, would simply have been crime fiction, surely no one insists that *horror* be synonymous with *fantasy*, for all, in its own subjective and lunatic way, Spider's narrative is quite fantastic. It is a peek into the dark, forbidden places of the human psyche. That is enough.

McGrath's new novel is not a waste—garde, but intensely traditional, not entirely successful, but clearly a matter of the horror tale returning to its gothic roots, which lie beneath the crumbling House of Usher.

Darrell Schweitzer is the editor of *Weird Tales*.

## The Science Fiction Writers of America Handbook: The Professional Writer's Guide to Writing Professionally edited by Kristine Kathryn Rusch & Dean Wesley Smith

Eugene, OR: Writer's Notebook Press, Pulpouse Publishing, 1990; \$10.00 wraps; 248 pages  
reviewed by Brian Stableford

For reasons explained in the introduction, this is not a book which sets out to explain how the SFWA member ought to write. It sets out instead to explain how the SFWA member might more effectively handle the business end of being a writer. In the main, inevitably, such advice consists of explaining how that obese juggernaut the publishing industry runs, and what little there is that a writer can try to do (short of self-immolation) to oil its wheels.

This is not an instruction manual, but a work of reference whose various articles might be consulted in times of need. If, however, one reads it from cover to cover, as some SFWA members might and as a reviewer is more-or-less required to do, one can acquire a sense of its tacit ideals as well as its overt ambitions.

Chief among these tacit ideals, if I may be permitted to confer a label upon it as well as detect its presence, is *efficiency of enterprise*. Much of the advice offered herein—although that advice comes from many different advisors whose personalities are as varied as one might expect—could be summed up as: don't sit on your butt and hope it will all happen naturally; do something—but make sure that what you do is actually useful.

Appropriately enough, this volume is itself one more in an unfolding series of monuments to the efficient enterprise of its editors, whose Pulpouse empire continues to embark upon one gloriously daring experiment after another. No established publisher wanted to produce this book because no established publisher thought that there was enough money in it, and in the absence of any ready-made deal the members of SFWA were content to allow the book to remain undone—until Ms. Rusch and Mr. Smith came along. There really is a lesson in this for all of us. Those who can, do; those who couldn't can now at least read the handbook, and one day. . . .

There are, of course, people in the world who think of writing as a process to which the ideals of efficiency should not apply, dependent on such haphazard factors as "inspiration" and "talent" rather than discipline and practice. Such people may feel that efficiency in handling one's work after its completion might somehow be infectious, becoming a mechanizing blight upon the creative process itself. Such a suspicion is not unknown even among writers. Those whose self-images are constructed on this model—they are the ones who waffle on about their characters appearing to them in visions and demanding to be written about, and who complain bitterly about the agony of being "blocked," always remaining convinced that their source of creativity is outside their conscious minds, unamenable to calculation, control and organization—often take a positive pride in not being businesslike, and in being completely helpless when confronted with the calculated, controlled, and organized world of agents, publishers, distributors, and booksellers. Writers of this kind, and others who believe that the creative process should be seen in this light, will probably not be

thankful to receive or contemplate this handbook. Indeed, such persons may not be content merely to find it unhelpful; it is not impossible that there will be some who see it as something dangerous and faintly obscene, antipathetic to everything they hold dear.

I must confess that I cannot take this argument very seriously, even though (or perhaps because) I would have to count myself among the sufferers if it were in fact true that businesslike habits were so infectious that once they were admitted into a hitherto-innocent writer's brain they would quickly become the sole dictators of what he or she chose to write. My own literary tastes are, to put it politely, esoteric—and by no means *fashionably* esoteric. The writers I most like to read never have best sellers, nor are they compensated for this failure by the applause of the orthodoxly-designated cultural and academic elite. It would be unfortunate, indeed, from my point of view, if a handbook such as this one were to have the effect of making my favorite writers stop writing the sort of thing I like and start writing stuff which would make pots of money instead. Mercifully, I do not believe that it will, nor even that it could if it wanted to—which, in fact, it doesn't.

If *The SFWA Handbook* did have an effect of this kind, it might justifiably be reckoned a dangerous book, if only to the interests of SFWA. After all, despite recently-improved fortunes of the *sf* genre, much bigger money can be made by writing romances, thrillers, and horror stories. Fortunately, one of the things all the contributors take for granted is that writing in general and *sf* writing in particular is intrinsically *worth* doing. However ruthless they may be in preaching efficiency, they always retain the notion that the enterprise itself is sacred; their message is not "drop everything else and do that which will make you rich," but rather "if you're going to do something as freaky as writing *sf*, you'd better do all you can to give it a reasonable chance to get the stuff off the ground." I can easily imagine some of its readers being terrified by its uncompromising revelation of the myriad ways in which one can be inadequate to the task of getting one's favorite enterprise off the ground (in fact, to be scrupulously honest, I don't have to imagine it—I don't know what it will do to the others, but by God it terrifies me) but even terror can be productive, if used judiciously as a spur.

This is not a dangerous book, nor is it faintly obscene; when it is not setting out mere matters of fact for purposes of reference it is mostly content with stating the obvious. (I have always wanted to review a book which I could sincerely praise with faint damns, and *The SFWA Handbook* has given me the opportunity at last!) An awkward job has been done as well as anyone could reasonably expect, and when one recalls that it was so difficult for so long to get the job done at all, the members of the SFWA have reason to be doubly grateful. ▶

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## A Metaphor for the Multiverse

Continued from page 1

opens inwardly, viewing the world through the window of the individual soul. The line from Stevenson and Mary Shelley through Conrad and Joyce to Lessing and Burgess and Amis *is* clear; I refer to the shared sensibility of workers within a common tradition and do not mean to suggest an evolutionary process progressing inevitably from writer to writer. What I do mean to suggest is the existence of a rich literary tradition drawn on by many writers of dissimilar aims and methods.

In America, a different tradition has come to exist. Here the essential metaphors of the European tradition in science fiction were taken at face value. The inner focus was more or less naively projected outward upon the hard, sleek, glittering surfaces of the objects of technology. It could be argued that while the British created science fiction, Americans made the genre what it is today; that is, an isolated backwater jealous of its diminishing territory, self-referential to the point of decadence, touchy and insecure as far as the criticism of outsiders is concerned and bullying and elitist in its self-criticism. They invented the literature; we made the market.

There has never been much of an American market for truly literate, innovative science fiction—the New Wave of the late sixties and seventies notwithstanding. The pattern was set from the beginning, in the so-called Golden Age of science fiction, which, though contemporary with the rise of Modernism and its various offshoots, was itself marked by a general conservatism that owed more to pulp fiction than Ernest Hemingway . . . to say nothing of such radical innovators of style and subject as Joyce, Woolf, or Faulkner. It was in the Golden Age that the fatal and supremely American distinction between ideas and style sprang up in both the writing and criticism of sf, as in "I don't expect great writing when I read sf; I read for the IDEAS." It was not until the fifties that such literate and ambitious writers as Bester, Budrys, and Dick appeared on the American scene . . . with no detriment to the quality of sf's "ideas" that I am able to judge. The same goes for their New Wave successors: Robert Silverberg, Harlan Ellison and, above all, Samuel R. Delany.

Things followed a somewhat different course in England. The New Wave in England was in many ways a declaration of independence from a colonial power. While the American champions of the New Wave were busy cashing in on (and sabotaging) the new market of "literate" science fiction in this country, their English counterparts were liberating science fiction from the reigning American market. As editors of *New Worlds*, and in his own fiction as well, Michael Moorcock led in that resurrection and principled reassertion of their European tradition in science fiction. The New Wave succeeded more fully in England than it did here, but its greatest success was to liberate individuals. Through their own efforts, Moorcock, Aldiss, and Ballard (and many others) won the freedom in which to develop as serious writers inside or outside the (still) American-dominated genre. Delany, Silverberg, and Ellison lacked that freedom.

In the American market, a writer who tries to be innovative or original is in danger of losing his or her audience or being branded as disloyal to the field: which may have the identical result. The servile mentality engendered by this Mephistophelean system is responsible for some of the current literary worthlessness of science fiction: "hard" or "soft," cyberpunk or whatever. This system has been and continues to be responsible for the ruin of considerable talents whose possessors, never meaning to surrender and often with the best intentions and reasons, sooner or later succumb to the temptation of supporting themselves and their families. Some writers richly deserve contempt for the alacrity with which they prostitute their talents, but I would be foolish indeed to blame any writer for a sacrifice whose necessity I can understand all too well. However I can and do blame those who make such sacrifices necessary and who profit by them. A whore is not by definition evil; a pimp is always so.

The irony is that one need not abandon science fiction in order to create worthwhile literature. Rather, it is the stultifying influence of the market that must be abandoned. To truly succeed as an artist, one must continually fight to transcend all limits, whether self-imposed or imposed from the outside. That the attempt ends in failure (as all attempts to realize an artistic vision must do) is unimportant *provided*

the attempt is made again and again and again. To be an artist is to bang one's imagination against the walls of the possible until either wall or imagination comes tumbling down. A talent (or tradition) that is not assertive and bold, that does not seek growth even at the price of failure, that in fact fears growth more than failure, will inevitably wither and die.

That is why a book like *Mother London*, clearly coming out of the European tradition in its broadest and most democratic sense, and a masterpiece into the bargain by any measure one cares to invoke, science-fictional or otherwise, is so welcome and important. That a work of such brave distinction was written by a science-fiction writer, and not a writer who has, however skillfully, assimilated certain of the techniques and strategies of science fiction (Thomas Pynchon, Doris Lessing, Don DeLillo, Stephen Wright, et al.), seems incredible to me.

I realise some will object that Moorcock has financed *Mother London* and other serious efforts by works written in cynical exploitation of the American market. My answer to this objection is: So what? Even in his most inferior work—inferior, that is when measured against his own standards, not those of the rest of the field—Moorcock has always dealt with serious matters and shown an admirable willingness to experiment: indeed, *Mother London* does not stand apart from the rest of his career, in aloof repudiation, but rather represents a triumphant culmination, an integration and simplification of previous concerns, both thematic and stylistic, the various strains swelling into one grand symphony of myth and history, destiny and desire, time and madness and memory.

The model for *Mother London* is *Ulysses*. Like that great novel, *Mother London* is a book of wanderings through time and space and memory (though in one sense on a vaster scale, spanning forty-odd years rather than a single day, from 1940 [or earlier, counting the reach of memory] to approximately 1986). And because the three main characters—Josef Kiss, Mary Galsale and David Mummery (a trinity echoing not only the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and that of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus but also Joyce's trinity of Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom, and Stephen Daedalus)—are telepaths and empathists, Joyce's technique of the interior monologue or stream of consciousness becomes in Moorcock's hands a Greek chorus in which the entire population of London, indeed the city itself, is given a distinctive voice. The realistic depiction of telepathy in a contemporary setting has rarely been accomplished so successfully in science fiction. Until now, Robert Silverberg's minor classic *Dying Inside* has been the outstanding example (and Moorcock gives a tip of the hat to David Selig in his creation of a fictional alter-ego named David Mummery). *Dying Inside* is "about" the loss of Selig's telepathic talents, which have always been a great boon (and crutch) to him and which he has employed in much the way we all imagined in our juvenile fantasies. Although Selig's predicament is presented with great sensitivity and skill, one is apt to grow tired of his whining (it always seemed to me that the character of Selig owes a lot to Peter Parker). But while Moorcock may still view every sword as Stormbringer, he has long since outgrown Elric. In *Mother London*, the question is not how to survive the loss of a neat superpower but rather how to live with it—a much more difficult task. Though indebted to *Dying Inside*, *Mother London* is a work of greater ambition, maturity and artistry.

Mother London, ancient, more than a little mad, is thus herself a character, presented not only through the changing face of the city over the course of nearly half a century—from the Nazi blitz to the blitz of Margaret Thatcher—but also in the chaotic scramble of thoughts and desires, reigning from the sublime to the perverse, that our three main characters cannot help but "overhear" and viciously experience. London is also present in the wonderfully eccentric character of Old Noony, a.k.a. Eleanor "Colman" (she claims to have married the film star Ronald Colman during World War II), who functions as the avatar of the city (indeed, all the characters have this archetypal dimension, but none so plainly as Old Noony). "I'm as old as the hills and older than the Tower of London," she boasts (as she is wont to do). "It'll take an H-bomb to kill me!" Draped "in the most vivid shades of lilac blue, turquoise and lavender, like an overdone Sargem," she wanders

the city's old paths, many of them obliterated by fire and bombs, crossed by new roads, broken by tunnels or viaducts, yet as familiar to her as secret mass trails existing here before London as built where the Thames was shallow and easily

fording on swampland out by myriad streams now all diverted, sewers. More complicated than an electronic circuit. no longer always visible, the paths Non follows grew out of singular tensions, eccentric decisions, whimsical habit, old forgotten purposes, so that she appears to move at random when actually she travels ancient and well-used arteries, though most would not recognize her signposts since she steers by association, by an instinct as profound as any jungle hunter's, and will say her skill is nothing more than common sense.

Compare this with the passage quoted in the text below, in which David Mummery's theory of "urban evolution" is outlined. I should also mention that Old Nonny's wanderings are not unlike the web spun by that mad spider, Time, which itself aptly describes Moorcock's structural method in this book, also discussed below.

These strong and fully drawn characters are Moorcock's greatest successes in a long career of memorable creations. There has always been a Dickensian vitality to Moorcock's characterizations, a tendency to comic exaggeration only increased by his delight in irony and the fantastic. It has been written of Dickens that his characters were not larger than life but instead larger than fiction, and the same can be fairly said of Moorcock. But as Moorcock has moved away from the purely fantastic, especially over the course of the last decade, his work has grown more finely understated. Not that he has embraced a pure realism, but rather than he has come to depend less on exaggeration and irony for his effects. His fiction is fuller now, more generous and assured. His characters, too, have grown fuller, become more complex and complete, more human. They contain more. And they are a delight to know.

Josef Kiss, huge and flamboyant, jolly as a lustful Santa Claus, describes himself as "a hysterical with certain crude telepathic gifts which I have no interest in promoting." He attends psychiatric clinic, takes the medication prescribed, then once or twice a year treats himself to an unmedicated "vacation" in a private clinic of his own choosing where he can go quietly bonkers without danger to himself or others. A lover of flowers and summer heat, he is plagued by tiny demons, lascivious women with flaming red hair who seek to entice him into a hellish fire that would consume his pure and generous soul. "Mr. Kiss," they enquire, "tiny perfect bodies contorting lewdly. 'Can you eat fire?' During the Blitz, working as an air-raid warden, Mr. Kiss did just that, his telepathic talents and perhaps other mental powers allowing him to sniff out those buried alive beneath the rubble of alien buildings and, in at least one case, to defuse an unexploded bomb while overhead, in a hellish sky seething with the flames of a burning London, "all the beasts of the apocalypse leered" and, in his head, "a wave of anguished voices" joined in one "single monumental howl"—the cry of the wounded city.

Mary Gaslee, widowed in the Blitz (after which she sank into a coma for 15 years, wandering through the Land of Dreams, a London populated by movie stars and other archetypal figures of myth and history), seems perpetually young, her red hair the outward visible sign of an inner fire (not unlike the Holy Spirit, which descends in tongues of flame that ignite the soul but do not burn the flesh) capable of kindling the souls of others to new life and, just perhaps, of either interrupting into the material world as an all-consuming fire (which she fears) or drawing flames back into itself, consuming them (which she also fears). David Mummery describes these two types of fire—the one sacramental, the other destructive—which in different guises constitute one of Moorcock's central themes, in a beautiful passage recollecting an encounter with Mary Gaslee:

I think my lady sings to me for I have the impression of a delicate tune. I sigh and my blood begins to catch fire. It is not, she says, a damaging fire but a fire which heals and replenishes, promising eternal delight. There is a fire which destroys, she tells me: an evil fire created by warlike, depraved, and wicked men. Our fire, which struck down at us amongst the flowers, is the creation of the opposite force. Our fire heats a crucible in which female and male principles unite and become impervious, strong perhaps immortal, though the flesh dies.

## Michael Swanwick Writing in My Sleep (seventh in a series)

There's not much I can say about the following. It was written in my sleep. I have no agenda to push, no ontology to promote, no nihilistic dogma to force upon the reader. At least, I have no none of which I am aware. But I hope your dreams are more comforting than are some of mine.

### "God"

The train bearing God—long anticipated—pulls into the station. The Pope, the President, dignitaries and common folk, everyone is waiting on the platform to welcome Him. Unarmed security people are everywhere. Already they have lovingly apprehended many schizophrenics and assassins, and brought them as gently as possible to hospitals where they can be seen to and cared for. Great care has been taken that nothing will mar this day. But the first class section is empty. So too is second class. Tourist is empty. God is not in with the freight. The Pope himself gets down on his hands and knees to crawl under the train and see if possibly God is riding the rods. Nothing.

The engineer, the porter, the conductor, have no explanation. They are as puzzled as anyone.

Nobody knows quite what to make of this. ▶

There seems no other explanation than this for Mary Gaslee's escape from the conflagration that claimed her husband in the wake of a Nazi air-raid: she walking untouched through the flames as if floating on air, her baby cradled in her arms, already sinking into the sleep form which she would not emerge for 15 years . . . if indeed she ever fully emerges from the Land of Dreams, for as she comes to wonder, and as Moorcock suggests, "[I]nstead of entering the real world, could she have actually brought the real world into her own?"

David Mummery, a child of the Blitz in and out of mental institutions since the age of 15, functions in part as an authorial alter-ego (a mummery is a masked performance). Born in 1940, the same year as Moorcock, Mummery, like his creator, is extremely precocious, indeed a child prodigy, beginning his professional writing career while still in his teenage years. Something of a clairvoyant, who stopped his party games with a tarot when his dire predictions kept coming true, Mummery fancies himself an "urban anthropologist" and is more inclined to see his extraordinary psychic powers, and those of Josef Kiss and Mary Gaslee, as natural products of

urban evolution: as a Brazilian native of the rain forest was able instinctively to use all his senses to build up a complex picture of his particular world, so could a city dweller read all his own relevant signs, just as unconsciously, to form an equally sophisticated picture.

When just a boy, Mummery was rescued from certain death in the fiery heart of a V2 explosion by a flying man endowed with superhuman strength, a black sailor whom he comes to know in later years, at the psychiatric clinic, as Mombazhi Paysha, a.k.a., the Black Captain. Along with Josef Kiss, his Uncle Jim and, most importantly, Mary Gaslee—the memory of whose lost love he treasures like an icon—the Black Captain constitutes one of the central figures in Mummery's rather desperate personal mythos . . . and not only Mummery's. All distinction between Mummery and his creator seems to vanish in statements such as the following, which could stand as an epigraph for the book: "By means of our myths and legends we maintain a sense of what we are worth and who we are. Without them we should undoubtedly go mad."

This is a sentiment shared by a generation of British artists to which Moorcock belongs. Their work is distinguished by a fragmentation of

style and a profound concern with the relative persistence or impermanence of objects, memory and desire—and of the values spawned in the brief convergences and divergences of these physical and psychic realities—that must certainly owe more than a little to the England of the Blitz. The similarities between *Mother London* and Dennis Potter's brilliant *The Singing Detective*, for example, are striking on all levels; the two could almost be literary brothers—and Bootman's *Hops and Glory* would not be out of place in this company either.

Myth, miracles and madness are the major strands out of which Moorcock weaves his story; in fact, they are woven so tightly as to constitute almost a single strand. For as David Mummary states, referring to Josef Kiss and Mary Gasalee, "[t]he experience of miracles formed the chief bond between us all," by which he means not merely their various escapades from the fires of the Blitz but their mental powers and sensitivity to the very possibility of such things as miracles, i.e., "madness."

In 1956, Josef Kiss (age 44), Mary Gasalee (32 and looking half that, a deep beauty freshly awakened from her coma [and by a "Kiss"] and David Mummary (15) meet in a mental institution rather preciously called Bethlehem Mental. This is not, by the way, how the book begins, but merely a convenient way to introduce one of the main strands of its web. It is important to note that there is no traditional plot here, but rather a gradual unfolding, constantly evolving pattern that, though independent of time, is made up of many events, many persons, in time. The more complete one's awareness of this pattern, the greater one's appreciation of the beauty of *Mother London*. I discuss this "achronological" structural pattern below.

In Bethlehem Mental, Mary Gasalee seduces both David and Josef (though in the case of Kiss, it's a toss-up as to who is the seducer, who the seduced). Once released, the three continue to meet as friends (and sometimes more) on the streets of London and in various psychiatric clinics and institutions which they are forced (as much by their own peculiar gifts as by the brutally solicitous bureaucracy of the NHS) to attend. Like *Ulysses*, a large portion of *Mother London* takes place not only on city streets but in and around pubs, which possess a secular role but are also suggestive of lost ritual. This nostalgic mingling of sacred and secular is characteristic of Moorcock.

In Hogarthian tradition, London is Bedlam writ large, and in that sense the book takes place within a vast asylum. There are no doctors; all are patients. Everyone suffers from delusions, only some are more aware of the fact than others and, accepting it, achieve a certain wisdom though at the cost of sufferings inflicted both by their own sensitivity and by a society which interprets that sensitivity as a weakness to be punished or corrected or exploited. (See, e.g., the lives of artists of such peculiar sensitivity that they might almost be telepaths and empathists themselves: Van Gogh, Rilke, Kafka, etc.) As one character, Dandy Banaji, says about his friend Josef Kiss, "I feel in the presence of a specialised species at once more highly evolved than my own yet almost certainly doomed to early extinction."

The personal delusions or myths of the patients (as Moorcock refers to his characters) thus reflect and refract the myths of the city (and vice versa). The distinction between madness and sanity is subjective, lying wholly in personal systems of belief: there alone is salvation or damnation, good or evil, to be found. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that only through self-awareness are Moorcock's characters able to choose between sanity and madness, good and evil. It is his insistence upon the necessity of this choice that makes Moorcock such a deeply religious writer.

The foundation of *Mother London's* greatness is its structure, the living pattern that underlies and permeates the book. Despite the presence of telepathy, it is on this structural level that *Mother London* can be best appreciated as sf. Not only does viewpoint shift from chapter to chapter and frequently within chapters between and among the main characters (and certain minor characters), but time itself shifts radically from "past" to "future." Nor is it by any means certain that the various pasts and futures—though featuring the same characters or anyway characters with the same names and similar personalities—correspond to a single reality. Though presented with greater dexterity than ever before, this structural background should be familiar to any more-than-casual reader of Moorcock's fiction. And it is this characteristic, above all, that constitutes what I have called "Moorcockian sf."

Time and space in Moorcock's works have always been relative and untrustworthy, agents or symbols of doom, of destiny. Against these ever-shifting coordinates he sets his brave and foolish heroes—lonely, brooding, disaffected men like Elinor and Jerry Cornelius, aspects of an Eternal Champion whose role is essentially sacrificial, as in "Behold the Man." Visualize the Cross as a coordinate system whose vertical axis is space and the crucified Christ, or, better, Pierrot, becomes the classic Moorcockian hero—or, if you prefer, victim.

In that sacrifice there is tragedy but also triumph. Tragedy within the bounds of time and space as we humans perceive them; triumph in the transcending of those illusory bounds. For to Moorcock time and space are in the end identical, differing manifestations in various linked realities of one great force or pattern pervading all that exists. The hero's life, moreover, has meaning in that by the manner of his life and death he can influence the pattern, enhance (enhance!) or mar its beauty and harmony. Not unlike Faulkner, who was also deeply concerned with shifting temporal, spatial and personal coordinates and who created a universe, Yoknapatawpha, in which to express the interweaving and recurrent patterns of individual lives against the broad dissolving sea of spacetime, Moorcock has built in book after book his own fictional universe, the Multiverse, which, like a jewel of infinite faces, refracts light, or reality endlessly.

As David Mummary puts it:

Past and future both comprise London's present and this is one of the city's chief attractions. Theories of Time are mostly simplistic like Dunne's, attempting to give it a circular or linear form, but I believe Time to be like a faceted jewel with an infinity of planes and layers impossible either to map or to contain; this image is my own antidote to death.

One of Moorcock's greatest triumphs in *Mother London* is his use of London, in a historical and mythic sense, as a metaphor for the Multiverse of his earlier fiction:

By means of certain myths which cannot easily be damaged or debased the majority of us survive. All old great cities possess their special myths. Amongst Londoners in recent years is the story of the Blitz, of our endurance.

The following quote, from Jung's essay *Analytical Psychology*, illuminates Moorcock's conception of the city in its multiversal aspect, which is, of course, as much related to the London of the present work as to the Tanelorn of his early fictions and the Constantinople, Byzantium, and Mirenburg of his later, more mature books. Jung is writing of the collective unconscious, but I will change his terminology to bring the passage more into line with the present discussion:

If it were permissible to personify [the city], we might call it a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at [its] command a human experience of one or two million years, almost immortal. If such a being existed, [it] would be exalted above all temporal change; the present would mean neither more nor less . . . than any year in the one hundredth century before Christ; [it] would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to [its] immeasurable experience, [it] would be an incomparable prognosticator. [It] would have lived countless times over the life of the individual, of the family, tribe and people, and [it] would possess the living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay.

Unfortunately—or rather let us say, fortunately—this being dreams.

And it is from these dreams that myth arises, not independently of the dreams and actions of people, but in some mysterious concert with them. Mummary's poignant metaphor of time as a jewel of infinite planes and layers, an image he cherishes as an "antidote for Death," describes as well the novel's structure—itsself, like London, a meditation on myth and time, and, for the writer in general, similarly an antidote to death, a means of immortality. (As, for example, Keats' Grecian Urn.)

## Read This

Recently Read and Recommended by John Brunner:

Late last year my best friend died and left me her library, which I am slowly working through, so recently I've read very few current books. The item from her legacy that has given me most fun is an 1807 cookery book "useful to" *inter alios* "Gentlemen who do not keep a Man Cook." (That's me.) It proposes menus for every day of the year including 29th February. None that I can find include fewer than fifteen dishes; most have nineteen or more, and one is to feed an entire regiment of 700 rifle volunteers. I'm obliged to assume that the user was expected to make a selection.

Apart from that, however, let me second previous commendations of Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life*, while if anyone out there still has not got around to *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, I'd like to point out an aspect of the novel that I didn't see mentioned in any of the reviews I read. It's hilariously funny! It's one of the few books I've run across since *Ulysses* that have forced me to set them down now and then in order to recover my breath.

Speaking of funny books: try Alex Comfort's tongue-in-cheek *The Philosophers*, a borderline of novel in which a young, mild-mannered academic decides that the Tory

government of Britain is behaving like an occupying power and sets out, with the help of friends and students, to bring it down. A wish-fulfillment fantasy, and none the worse for that.

The winner of the 1990 Martin Luther King Memorial Prize was adjudged to be *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* by Lynn Pan. It's a fascinating study of the Chinese diaspora, packed full of information (including stuff that Martin Booth, one of my co-adjudicators, said he'd been after for years) yet astonishingly readable.

Having adored John James's *Votan* and *Not for all the Gold in Ireland*, I belatedly laid hands on *Men Went to Camrath*, a very different sort of novel but equally impressive. Based on the oldest poem to survive which was composed in Britain, the *Gododdin* of Aneirin, it gives a remarkable and convincing picture of life here after the departure of the Romans.

And Clifford Stoll's *The Cuckoo's Egg* is another find-it-if-you-missed-it book: as tense as the kind of good mystery you can read a second time even though you know the ending, for you remain hooked by the minutiae of its resolution. ▶

*Mother London* is divided into six parts, the first and last of which, "Entrance to the City" and "Departure of the Citizens," respectively, frame the four internal sections, themselves perfectly counter- and cross-balanced. "Entrance" and "Departure," with their theatrical and ritualistic evocations, consist of four chapters each, which mirror each other exactly. This mirror-image structure holds for the rest of the book, with three central events, symbolically identical, all occurring during the Blitz and having to do with miraculous escapes by the three main characters from German bombs and rockets serving as the mirror whose multidimensional surface, broken up like Mummy's temporal jewel or a cubist painting, reflects outward, across the years, and inward, through memory, the consequences of those events in the lives of the city of London and its citizens.

Moorecock, with consummate technique and considerable daring, has broken up the linear flow of time and narrative, of individual consciousness and memory, so that these traumatic and symbolic events are embedded at the heart of the book, and in the characters' hearts as well, and are approached only indirectly, as the chapters jump or rather leapfrog in time and space and consciousness. Moorecock's method, like Faulkner's in *As I Lay Dying*, is one of the telling and retelling, of indirection and misdirection, not only of reflection but of refraction as well. He presents a situation or character from many differing and even paradoxical angles, circling in gradually and then moving away, suggesting that there is no one correct understanding of what happened or what it all means but that the totality, however ungraspable, is what counts. Subjectivity, multiplicity, ambiguity rule alike for myths and men. But Moorecock's vision is not so dark as Faulkner's, and the Eden at the heart of *Mother London*, symbolized in the cottage of Chloë and Beth Scaramanga, where Josef Kiss miraculously defuses an unexploded bomb, becomes, in a sense the altar upon which the Mass of the book—as well as a sacrifice I will not divulge—is performed.

The two chapters dealing with Josef Kiss's defusing of the bomb—"Late Blooms 1940" and "Early Departures 1940"—stand at the book's center in a structural sense. The reflecting and distorting mirror I spoke of earlier lies between them, so to speak. Or, put in Mummy's terms, if the whole book is a jewel of many planes and layers (i.e., sections and chapters, characters and thoughts, places and times, all interpenetrating), here we have located one point of convergence

within the jewel. Of course there are others. Three groups of two chapters each take place in the same years, each associated (primarily) with Kiss, Gaslee, and/or Mummy. The first I have referred to above. The second lies in the two chapters that take place in 1956, the year Mary Gaslee awakens and begins her relationship with Josef Kiss and David Mummy—"Waiting Rooms" and "Alternating Couplings." The third lies in the two chapters in 1985, "The World's End" and "Princess Diana." All of these chapters are concerned (among other things) in one way or another with the presentation of various aspects of an Edenic archetype (including its opposite). Indeed, so is every other chapter. Among its most important reflected/refracted aspects are Bethlehem Mental, where our characters meet, especially its two greenhouses, one where plants thrive, the other where humans droop in body and spirit; Kew Gardens, where Josef Kiss and his wife consummate their love and, years later, Mr. Kiss is arrested; Mary Gaslee's apartment; Josef Kiss's various apartments; a carousel at a fair upon which our characters go for an ecstatic spin; even, to David Mummy, 10 Downing Street, where his Uncle Jim lives and works. Multiplicity, counterpoint, parallel—these constitute the heart of Moorecock's technique in *Mother London*.

Moorecock's cumulative effect depends thus on intricate narrative movements that work out from this center (and the others) on many levels, traveling both forward and backward in time, crossing and crisscrossing, paralleling and reversing and looping while, simultaneously, falling in towards the center, all the while building towards a climax hinted at in the first Part, "Entrance," and presented (again, indirectly) in the final Part, "Departure." These two "framing" Parts, to extend the metaphor to its furthest point, act as the setting in which the jewel has been inlaid. Or, looked at another way, they represent the Host both before and after it has been sanctified by the sacrament of the book. Again, it is this patterning of time that constitutes Moorecock's essential vision, one originally developed and elaborated within the framework of *sf* and, I think, still best understood and appreciated as *sf*.

If, in *Mother London*, Moorecock ultimately transcends the specific and moves to a consideration of the origins and functions of myth in time, he never loses sight of the city of London and its inhabitants or of the grand and tragic story of love and loss and redemption that he has to tell, a story of individual endurance in the face of increasing general madness and decay, a myth of survival in and for the modern world. ▶

Gene Wolfe  
Smiling, She Met the Dragon

Sharon Baker died yesterday. I gained the honor of her friendship nine years ago, when I taught a little four-day writing workshop in Florida for the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, then more frequently known as Swanncon.

Oh, damn! We can do so little to help and heal each other. We can hurt each other terribly, and we do it all the time. We can maim and kill and cripple each other, and cause enough pain and suffering to make statues cry for us. (Yes, they do. Read the paper and watch the news.) But when it comes to helping each other, we're as helpless as cattle.

In four days, Barry Malisberg, James Gunn, Brian Aldiss, and I were supposed to teach Sharon and a dozen other people how to write. Fortunately for us both, Sharon didn't need anyone to teach her how to write; she already knew, had been born knowing or perhaps had been given her talent while she was still very young. (She told me once that as a small girl she had seen an angel; I have always suspected that the angel was making a delivery.) I provided a little help with paraphrasing and told her not to use so many hyphens. Other than that, my teaching consisted of telling her repeatedly—you had to tell Sharon repeatedly—how good she was, and explaining to her (since she would soon be teaching such workshops herself) exactly how we workshop teachers acquire our reputations.

It's simple, really; but it works. We find students who are clearly going to be successful writers and lavish attention upon them, teaching them everything we know about hyphens and paraphrasing.

Don't get me wrong. There were other students in that class who wrote every bit as well as Sharon. But Sharon had what coaches call *desire* and *soldiers' guts*. When the others spoke of stories, she spoke of books, which says it all. The others (I doubt that you would recognize their names) found the idea of writing a hundred thousand words daunting; Sharon found it exhilarating.

She was a doctor's wife from the West Coast. (Maybe I should throw that in here.) She was the mother of four sons. As I wrote someone not long ago, when I learned how ill she was, she would have been perfect for the Daisies if someone were casting Alice's Wonderland garden of talking flowers, a diminutive woman with a chirpy little voice and a sunny face framed in yellow curls, funny and optimistic.

When she returned home, she wrote, "Thank you for your encouragement. When you compared me to Ursula Le Guin I was stunned. And scared. After eighteen years of being my husband's wife and my children's mother, it was intimidating to have you . . . take me even a little seriously." Sharon never really took herself seriously, or understood just how good she was; that was one of her many virtues as a person, and her chief fault as a writer.

One glance at Sharon told you, quite correctly, that she loved children and baked cookies. Because she looked like that and was like that, she could send your eyebrows above the scalp line. "Am I wrong in not being restrained in writing (once I figure out how not to overwrite)? The reason I ask is that my weekly freelance group keeps telling me to write sensually because, they say, I do it well and it's best to capitalize on strength. Fiction is still new to me—I've been writing it just under two years—and I love trying new things, so I've been happily evoking the five senses as they suggested. But somehow it comes out sexy. I need that steamy atmosphere in parts of *Quarreling*. They *Met the Dragon*: these kids use sex like a drug as well as a commodity; I want to show that and its crippling effect. But most science fiction is not sexy. Do you think I'm making a mistake in following my freelance group's advice?" By that casual reference to "these kids," Sharon meant male prostitutes, most of them runaway boys. She talked with them, helped them as much as she could, and numbered among her friends a good many young men who would make any seasoned street cop keep his hand close to his gun.

In the same letter Sharon also said: "An acquaintance heard some chapters of *Quarreling*. Later he told me that until he married he had been, as he put it, a practicing bisexual, and had hustled for a while. If he could help in any way, just ask, since he identified with my hero. I think I answered the way he wanted me to, as a person, but inside I

was thinking, wow! bingo! I got my character right! Reprehensible, but I've been worried about my effrontery in taking this on."

Needlessly, I quoted Frederik Pohl to her: "For a writer there is no such thing as good experience and bad experience. There is good experience and no experience." Adding on my own: "It cannot be reprehensible for you to put any experience into your art—unless some artist does that, the experience will be lost to mankind within a very few years and so wasted. What artist? The artist who happens to be there—in my life, me; in your life, you." I could not have known when I wrote that how few those years would be, although I think I had some inkling of how hard Sharon would work to make full use of them.

"What I write usually becomes a novel. But I'd like to try short fiction. Last week Jean Bryant, my freelance group leader, said to think hard before I stop working on the novel to try the short stories I have in mind. She said long and short fiction are different. She also said some people are natural novel writers, others are born short story writers, and that I'm one of the former." Sharon was indeed; she was a miller rather than a printer. She could keep company with the best sprinters, just the same. I remember how happy she was when Kathryn Cramer accepted her "House Hunter" for *Wells of Fear*, and how happy Kathryn was to get it.

I taught a workshop in the Pacific Northwest, which prompted a fill-in on summer activities. This is vintage Sharon.

"I hope you had a good summer and that you had better weather at Oregon's Haystack Conference than we did further north. We were in B.C. above the tip of Vancouver Island in a sailboat being rained on. All six of us, plus two of my sons' friends, plus a family of four rafted onto us, plus assorted soaked sleeping bags, sneakers, and jeans, all drying out around our oil stove. . . .

"I also have begun taking karate. I thought it would lend verisimilitude to my fight scenes. I'm finding it marvelous fun, but I'm not very aggressive. A massive, gentle black belt plants himself in front of me, growls, "Hit me!" and I can't. I'm afraid I'll hurt him."

The last letter (March 1, 1991) I received from Sharon described her current projects. "I've partially written a SF horror story about a mutant turtle, tricked by a boy into chopping the boy's evil stepfather. (I think turtles are funny—I wanted to see if I could make one scary.) But the story's in limbo at the moment. The special effects seem to be overpowering the human story. I think a story is more interesting if the human story predominates. And I'm struggling along on the same two books I've been working on—one about an amphibian girl trekking across a desert and an amphibian boy who stays home, told in more-or-less alternate chapters; the other a near-future-detective-first-contact-apocalyptic tale. (I may be trying to do too many things in it.)"

A columnist, Sharon said, had written that "the war didn't have real people in it, only poor blacks nobody knew, so it was like a video game one watched while eating popcorn." Sharon's tall, blond son Seth was in the Second Marine Division (he was involved in some of the heaviest fighting of the war), and she had written to the columnist protesting. He had interviewed her; she sent me a copy of his column, together with news of Seth. "His letters arrive here in about two weeks—ours take a month or two to get to him. So his first letters sounded rather bleak. However, the tape he sent sounded reassuringly like himself. ('The showers are buckets of cold water out in the open, so I only take a bath every other day. . . . In the background, accompanied by Game Boy Tetris music, a voice yells, 'Every other day, Baker? Try once a week!') As always, I'm glad Seth tells us what he's been doing *after* he's done it."

The final paragraph of this letter: "Well, I hope I'm going to the Conference on the Fantastic. I've been looking forward to seeing you and Rosemary there. But since January I've been stunned to find (a) I have two squished disks pushing on my spinal cord and producing pain (b) I have liver and pancreatic cancer. I'm going to the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center for surgery and chemotherapy Wednesday and will be there for perhaps a week to ten days. Except for a stitch in my side and the after-effects of the tests, I feel fine. I'm always fine. It's my kids who

need looking after. The books and my internist and my friend who survived a pituitary tumor say serenity, humor, and a positive attitude are my best chance for survival. But it's hard not to be scared. Writing helps, however.<sup>13</sup>

In March I sent her a copy of the first *Shadow of the Torturer* comic book. "Yes, I was surprised! And delighted! And Seth, who was brought home by the Marines again, has laid onto the comic forever and to any subsequent comics. And he promises to keep them in perfect condition (which from Seth is an amazing promise). Thank you! From me and from Seth!" This note was in a card showing a phantom woman in a bare wood catching a falling leaf; as soon as I opened the envelope, I knew what Sharon had told me. I went on hoping anyway.

Her books were *Quarreling*, *They Met the Dragon*, *Journey to Mewblair*, and *Burning Tears of Sorrow*. All are science fantasies laid on the planet Napbar. All display Sharon's talent for the exotic, her unflinching sympathy for the young, her tireless fascination with alien biology, and her love of a good story. Avon was her only publisher, and Chris Miller her only editor. If you would like to learn more about her and her books than I have been able to tell you, watch for Gary K. Wolfe's critical article in the forthcoming revision of *Twentieth Century Science*

*Fiction Writers*. Gary has kindly provided me with an advance copy, and I recommend it highly; this personal tribute would have been worse without it.

I have already quoted at length from various letters I received from Sharon during our nine-year friendship; before closing, let me quote from the letter that Cassia receives from Jarrell in *Burning Tears*. "Death, I think, presents the final adventure, the one without maps or returns or fatuous survivors boring on about risks circumvented. Which then, of course, loses their danger, and so their interest. Now, this morning, my great adventure begins again, giving me the chance, at last, to match my mother's and grandfather's courage..."

Sharon died on June 4, leaving her grieving husband, Dr. Gordon P. Baker, who had supported and encouraged her throughout her brief career; her sons Brett, Seth, Jason, and Elliot, whom she loved with fierce pride, and countless friends who would gladly have worked and fought to save her, but were ultimately as helpless as Sharon herself. She was fifty-three. Hers was not an easy life nor an easy death, though her cheerfulness and determination made them seem so.

Gene Wolfe's most recent novel is *Pandora*, by Holly Hollander

## The Ring of Charon by Roger MacBride Allen

New York: Tor, 1990; \$4.95 pb; 500 pages

reviewed by Leonard Rysdyk

I was eagerly looking forward to Roger MacBride Allen's new book, *The Ring of Charon*, because I much admired his first novel, *Orphan of Creation*. It was the kind of book that gives a good name: thoughtful and sensitive, it was more than merely promising; it signalled a young writer to keep an eye on. The new book, I had heard, was to be about gravity waves, in fact, a gravity wave laser. Ah, now, we're talking science fiction!

When I got an actual copy, though, my heart sank. Even before one begins reading, the book screams messages at the reader, messages that promise more pulp than quality. The cover is embossed with a full-figure portrait of a slinky blonde woman in a skin-tight flight suit peering out a porthole and speaking urgently into a microphone. No doubt a mere marketing ploy, but not a good sign. The title page bears the subtitle, "The First Book of the Hunted Earth" and there is a preface in which Mr. Allen declares that although this book is the first in a series it "and the next, and all the books I ever have written and ever will write stand alone." Why doth he protest so much? After the table of contents is something really scary: a dramatic personae. The signals are clear. This is to be a dedicated member of that sub-genre, the "epic" work. I flipped to the back and there it was: a glossary. Could it be that one of the brightest new lights in the field had sold out? Already?

No, there is too much excitement and earnestness in the book to pin Mr. Allen simply as a mercenary. Rather, I think he has been caught in the trap that genre fiction holds for its fans. By definition, genre fiction adheres to particular conventions and thereby guarantees particular pleasures. Within a genre exist sub-genres which hold to even more particular conventions and thereby guarantee more forcefully more particular pleasures. There is nothing wrong with that; such a bargain was Edgar Rice Burroughs' meat and potatoes and at certain times his works are a thorough delight. Insofar as an author uses the conventions of a sub-genre as an organizational device, he makes a good deal. It becomes a devil's bargain, however, when an author subscribes so wholeheartedly to the conventions of his sub-genre that his books offer only those conventions and have nothing new to say for themselves. Like all the devil's bargains, sticking to the conventions is highly seductive. After all, the author enjoys the conventions for their own sake, as do the readers. Moreover, adherence takes a lot of pressure off a writer. His readers' expectations are so well-known, it is very tempting simply to satisfy them, then anything beyond those expectations becomes even more satisfying in comparison. The "epic" sub-genre guarantees it will boggle the reader's mind with bigness: big distances, big energies, big politics with big egos and broad powers. Part of the problem with *The*

*Ring of Charon* is that Mr. Allen shides too faithfully and too comfortably within the conventions of his sub-genre. There is new stuff here—the superscience—but it doesn't get a chance to shine.

It is possible to embark on an "epic" work and do a good job. Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series was good. It asked serious questions about politics and human nature and set them against a mind-bogglingly large society. *Dune* was even better. Frank Herbert narrowed the focus of his universe by centering the attention of the galaxy on one substance, the spice melange. One faction wanted not simply to misuse it—that would have been the conventional, merely "evil" answer—but to use it in a limited, self-serving way. The other side wanted to use the spice to unleash human potential and find truth and freedom. This was a conflict worthy of its galactic setting. Mr. Allen's plot also demands a galactic setting because of its premise, that Earth is stolen and transported through a wormhole to a sort of zoo where aliens keep a collection of planets in artificial orbits around a sun for inscrutable reasons. Unfortunately, his conflicts and goals are not up to their environment. The intriguing question is what do the aliens want with or from their menagerie, but the book concerns itself primarily with how to get the Earth back home. The plot is a simple rescue mission and despite its cutting-edge science and high-stakes conflict, it has the feeling of something we have been through before.

The excitement of the book's concept is dulled by Mr. Allen's devotion to and reliance on genre. More than merely being a standard "epic" it is a typical "disaster" novel. The same events unfold repeatedly as they are witnessed from the viewpoints of many characters. Done well, as in Greg Bear's *The Forge of God*, the characters may enhance the "mercenaries" of the events, bringing the gigantic actions down to human proportions. One would expect such humanizing from Mr. Allen who demonstrated an ability with character in his first novel. Unfortunately, the characters here serve only as remote cameras enabling the reader to witness events that are widely separated by time and space.

The characters also are pretty much what we would expect. Despite his ostensibly interesting name, Larry O'Shaunassy Chao is the typical sf protagonist: a bright young headstrong male, naive to the subtleties of human interactions. The same error holds true for every other character: he or she holds the potential for being interesting and unusual, but acts in a thoroughly predictable way. The most egregious error is found on the Naked Purple Habitat. In the Naked Purple People, Mr. Allen has something truly original. They are not mere anarchists, but complete—what, whimsy-ists?—ideological

cranks whose stated goal is to act and think in whatever way is necessary to antagonize anyone and everyone with whom they come in contact. Hot stuff. But which of the Naked Purple People does Mr. Allen choose as his point of view character? Chelated Noisemaker Extreme who, we are reminded with merciless repetition, is really named Frank Barlow and is only among the Naked Purple People because he needed the job as one of their radio technicians. His character is that he is diligently normal, but the friction this ought to cause between him and his employers is not exploited enough even for its comical implications.

Besides investing too heavily in the conventions of his sub-genre, Mr. Allen also falls back on a number of standard tropes and too-easy answers. Mr. Allen begins his novel with vast expository lumps. There is a long section given over to the explanation of the Knowledge Crash, an economic depression that came to pass because jobs had become so complicated, people spent their whole lives in training and retired before they were able to do any useful work. This is an interesting notion, but it never seems real because Mr. Allen never shows anyone affected by it nor does it play an important role in the development of the plot. It is only mentioned as the cause for the shutdown of the "gravity research station on Charon in the first few pages of the book. And that only happens to add unnecessary urgency to Larry Chao's desire to point a test-signal graser at various test objects including Earth. Larry's circumstances make him immune to the economic problem anyway: he is a young genius; the K-Crash hasn't touched him.

The unnecessary is followed by the predictable. The Earth disappears not once, but half a dozen times, to the point of redundancy. The one big surprise Mr. Allen has for us—that the graser woke up aliens and that it was they, not the graser, that caused the Earth to disappear—is not surprising because from the beginning appear italicized passages from the alien's point of view. The book also swears by that old Larry Niven standby: the human experts deduce an alien's *modus operandi* in one scene and in the next the alien is shown doing exactly as predicted. What should happen is that the human experts should be partly right, but that the alien should do something besides what is predicted, otherwise we merely get two expository lumps where one will do. And we get to feel smarmy as well.

The book plods on, enticing us with exciting concepts but never involving us in them. Everything is explained at a distance, usually in a conversation between scientists. The topics of the conversations are

fascinating: beings who inhabit a Dyson sphere and collect inhabitable planets, creatures that lie dormant as inorganic forms for millennia and carry the DNA of many species in their genes, a wormhole/portal where Earth once was. Great stuff. But it never comes fully alive.

Despite all the false starts and easy answers, there is much of interest in *The Ring of Charon*. There is a ton of supercience in it, handled with faithful attention to detail and just about all of it is cutting-edge. Finally, the last hundred pages, though mostly another expository lump thinly disguised as a conversation between two Martian geologists (one of whom is the lissome lass on the cover), contain some very interesting speculations about the supercience the previous four hundred pages described. Those of us who read *sf* for the science will not be disappointed.

Indeed many readers may be tempted to overlook the flaws I've observed. They will accept the book for what it is, a pious and obedient member of an easily recognized sub-genre. And they are partly right: all the shortcomings are part and parcel of the task Mr. Allen undertook for himself. Any work dealing with new scientific concepts and complicated interactions among them is sorely tempted to use the language of science, i.e., explanations. Similarly, any work dealing with a disaster of cosmic proportions is tempted to use the vocabulary that has already been worked out for such scenarios: the multiple viewpoints of many characters. No less a creative mind than Anthony Burgess used it in *The End of the World News*. To the extent that the characters in Allen's book are and must be scientists and technicians—who else would know what was going on during the disaster but the guys with the VDTs and chart printers?—and since they are speaking in their professional capacity, it makes sense that they tend to sound more alike than different. In fiction in general, and in genre fiction in particular, conventions often guide the discourse.

But from Mr. Allen, one would have hoped for more. After all, he started his career with *Orphan of Creation*, so it is not unfair to hold him to the high standards he set for himself. To see what Mr. Allen is capable of, we should look back at a great success he has already achieved.

One of the strengths of *Orphan* was its characters. It took the point of view of one of those underrepresented *sf*, a black, woman anthropologist, and described convincingly the ways science is a human concern, sidetracked by and prey to human frailty and responsible to human morality.

In it, Dr. Barbara Marchando finds in the backyard of her

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grandmother's house in Mississippi the bones—not the fossil—of an australopithecine, and her imagination, and the reader's, is ignited. Anthropology is rarely written about in *sf* and there is significance in the fact that some of the brighter lights in the field, Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Bishop, and Mr. Allen himself, have engaged it. It is a science that asks the questions that literature also asks: who are we? and how did we get this way? Mr. Allen does not flag in attempting to answer these questions. Dr. Marchando does not only dig up the bones, but pursues local records until she finds australopithecines alive—and enslaved—in Africa.

Convention would dictate that Mr. Allen write a simple geographical case study à la Indiana Jones. He does much more. He centers his attention on the discussions the characters have, not only on where to find the australopithecine, but on their motivations for doing so and on the implications of what they find along the way. When they locate the australopithecines, they debate their choices and never lose contact with the disturbing fact that while our culture has finally agreed that human slavery is immoral, we are not so clear about what to do about our cousins in the family Primata. While we have the luxury to debate the intelligence of (and therefore our responsibility toward) the great apes, whales, dolphins and elephants, Mr. Allen seizes the dilemma by the horns in regards to the australopithecines, not out of simple moralizing—another easy way out—but because he has chosen as his point of view character a black woman, that is, someone who cannot be luxuriously intellectual about the fate of an enslaved sub-group. At great risk to herself, she frees them and teaches them to speak (in AMSLAN).

In short, *Orphan of Creation* takes an interesting scientific premise and lets it loose upon real human beings, testing their responses and finally revealing to the reader a higher level of understanding of the world—the real world that is part scientific fact and part human reaction to it. Toward the very end of the book, Dr. Grossington says, "After all, [humans] are orphans, too. God and Nature left us to fend for ourselves without any of the divine intervention we thought we had, and thought we needed." *Orphan* is not just about scientific conjectures or technol-

logical artifacts, as *Ring* too often is, but about humans and their place in the world. It is science and fiction; in examining the human condition, it does what both ideally intend to do.

Could *The Ring of Chernob* have done as well? Probably not. It is hampered from its inception by concerns that are primarily physical, plot interests: where did the Earth go and how do we get it back? There is a simple, very conventional antagonism set up— whoever stole the Earth, whoever is killing the solar system, by attacking our home someone seems to be (merely, again) a bad guy. This is not to say, however, that action novels or books about the physical sciences are intrinsically doomed, but the author must remember that the real goal of physics is the same as that of literature and religion and the soft sciences, to find meaning. An ambitious author must write about a universe that is not made up only of artifacts and phenomena, but of our understanding of those things as well.

The rest of the *Hunted Earth* series holds promise not in whether or not the Earth is found but in the intentions of the aliens and the relationship that develops between them and humankind. There are some interesting possibilities for resonance here. The inhabitants of the Dyson sphere—or the sphere itself which may be a final form of evolution for its inhabitants—who are calling the shots have god-like possibilities. Are the aliens who lie dormant as rocks its angels or antagonists? A new, very small universe has been created among the menagerie of planets and in such proximity is solved the problem (involving distance and time-lag) of communication between worlds. Something really interesting could happen.

Mr. Allen still has plenty of room to break the conventions of his sub-genre and give us something that is as new in terms of plot and action as it is in terms of scientific speculation. Unfortunately, *The Ring of Chernob* works more as the five hundred page prelude to a really interesting story than a successful and satisfying novel on its own. ▶

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## The Cult of Loving Kindness by Paul Park

New York: William Morrow, 1991; \$20.00 hc; 312 pages

reviewed by John Clute

Like an arrow burying itself in sand, the Starbridge Chronicles continue to burrow into the world. *Soldiers of Paradise* (1987) was broken, fletched and flying down the aisles of story, *Sugar Rain* (1989) impacted the soil, churned and stirred through the roils of aftermath, and *The Cult of Loving Kindness*, one of the most extreme novels ever published in the genre, a novel whose relationship to normal narrative is that of the Ghost of Christmas Past to Scrooge, sifts the subterranean ambages of Starbridge in silence and in cunning, polishing the edges of a story long past and long to come. Not one event of the story itself does it tell.

There is a term this reviewer finds peculiarly relevant to works of this sort, works that is, which might be described as science fantasy in the sense that science fantasy strives not to change the world but to find out how the world became what it must be. The term is belatedness, and *The Cult of Loving Kindness* is a hymn to that condition. It is a hymn of embedding. Readers may remember—though Park has never wished to be clear about the physical circumstances governing his setting—that the Earth upon which the Starbridge Chronicles are set may or may not be our own Earth, hence, but that if it is indeed our Earth much has happened to transfigure it. The agent of transfiguration seems to be the moon or planet or other entity—called Paradise throughout the Chronicles—which may be assumed, under the simplest possible reading of the series, to be a trapped visitor to the solar system; the gravitational effects of its impossibly complex orbital dance among the nine planets have, we are allowed to guess, caused the extraordinary transformation of Earth into a world which suffers, Heliconia-like, a Great Year, with enormous seasons lasting lifetimes and determining by their nature the nature of the societies which exist within their compass;

*Soldiers of Paradise* took place just as Winter began to end, and the bonsoi contortions of the human societies of that season are about to collapse. In *Sugar Rain* we saw, through a slow-love story, the enormity of Spring. *The Cult of Loving Kindness* takes place in Summer. The central rhythms of the series so far, even though we have not yet traversed an entire Great Year, is one of retuning.

No thought of novelty penetrates the book, or invigorates its cast with any prospect of the sort of action which, in *sf* terms, might be described as penetrative. Each character is a mayfly in a cycle whose huge turning, too slow to grasp, still underlies every pulse of the heart, each gesture of the body in its life. Deep in the codes that write memory, and the perceptions of the world which spaniel memory at heels, everyone is reliving lives which gloss return. The Cult of Loving Kindness itself is a sect which replicates in pacific guise the frozen anguish of the Winter religion, dominated by the god Ankhdt, Whose Skull, seemingly rediscovered in the current volume, may be that of an extraterrestrial visitor from Paradise whose breeding with the naive stock of Earth generated the human stock of the Chronicles, whose blood is golden. The story of *The Cult of Loving Kindness*, which is not told but enfolded, repeats in the idiom of Summer the tale of the Princess and the Antinomial, whose forbidden love at the end of Winter seems almost to engender the explosion into Spring, the semen of the sugar rain. This time their role is taken by twins, reared from death by a nonhuman native of Earth returning to his native village where he will sit at the feet of his childhood guru and contemplate the meaning of things; the girl grows up eloquent and fluent, the boy with an antinomial's incapacity to utter in the abstracting syntaxes of normal language, speaking instead in offensive spasms rendered by Park with



cagy enfant-sauvage resonances. So the nonhuman student of the meaning of things—all, seemingly, unaware—harbours in his tiny village the return of the most explosive moment of the Cult of Loving Kindness. The twins commit incest, which we are allowed to witness, one of the few transgressions of Park's avoidance of raw event, perhaps because their loving is not intrinsically destructive or violent, but stands rather as an instigator or sign of events to come; their saviour commits suicide after the village is visited by inquisitions from the university, who serve both as mind police and as marshalling agents for the vicious industrialism which characterizes the high Summer culture; the twins escape, travel north to a sacred arena where Paradise will rise over lava fields and signify—the novel is a tissue of significations enfolded in scent and sight and déjà vu—the foredoomed and

final outcome of the twins' holy intercourse. And the book ends.

The density of the telling is at times very great—or, should one say, the density of the enfolding wings of belatedness is at times very great, very thick, as deeply humid as a dusk nightmare in the heart of summer after heavy rain. The radicalness of the book lies, however, not in the echolalia of belatedness it embodies, but in its obduracy of refusal of normal narrative. The wings are all we get, as they enfold. The memoriosness is all we get, as the cycle triumphs. The triumph of *The Cult of Loving Kindness* is that it sinks into the past faster than we can read it, that all we can know is a memory of wings. ▶

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## Raising the Stones by Sheri S. Tepper

New York: Doubleday, 1990; \$19.95 hc; 453 pages

reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

In my previous brushes with Sheri S. Tepper (*Jinian Footstep; The Marianne Trilogy*) I've felt the writer didn't yet know where she wanted to be in the realm of the fantastic: and she was in too much of a hurry, couldn't spare a moment to stop scribbling and make up her mind. The ideas were entertaining, the execution often perfunctory and shallow. *Raising the Stones* is my first encounter with Tepper as a writer of substance, securely established on the capacious middle ground between sf and genre fantasy. It's big, but it's not a complete doozy. It has the sprawling soap-opera cast of fantasy, but the decor of far future sf. It favours human incident well above plot closure; but has no brutally obvious intention of spawning a brood of sequels. And it's a solid piece of work, in more than its physical dimensions.

The setting is another planetary system ("in a distant galaxy" it says in the publicity. I always wonder about that expression... I should have thought this one was plenty big enough. But perhaps the reason for this wild remove is explained in an intervening novel). The time is a future so distant it really doesn't matter how far. But the human society bears archaeological traces of earth's history, seen from the twentieth century USA; and faintly remembers "the homeworld." There is a posited means of instantaneous travel between worlds. There are governmental moons, where the UN, UNESCO, Supreme Court and other metabureaucratic analogues beaver about wasting time. One moon holds (an interesting archaeological trace, this), a bizarrely overpowered Ultimate Law and Order Force for which the populations described can have no conceivable use. There is a civilized and cosmopolitan human-settled planet, there is a dull and featureless frontier planet given over to food production. There is a planet abandoned to scientific research and its horrid but not very bright native sentients. There was another race of native sentients on the frontier world, Hobbs Land—but they obligingly died out, in spite of the settlers' kindly efforts.

On Hobbs Land the native religion is having a mysterious resurgence. In one settlement after another, humans are insensibly drawn to reinstate the old rites, rebuild the temples. Each temple is inhabited by a fetid lump of something or other that bears some relation to a recent human corpse, and commands a regular blood sacrifice—albeit on a small scale. Sinister as this sounds, the effect is totally benign. This is a "God That Works." The crops flourish, the weather behaves, the scenery even becomes interesting; and the settlers are becoming irremediably happy, peaceful and good. Meanwhile on the civilised planet, a plantation of laterday Afrikaaner cum Islamic fundamentalists is practising slavery, planting terrorist bombs, oppressing women and generally causing grief. Hobbs Land is partly settled by fugitives from the nasty macho *Vornost*, among them a famous singer, Mairé Giras. Her son Sam resents having been separated from his father, and has (a rather fetchingly device) fantasies about being Thezeus and achieving some mythic reunion. The Vornosters want Mairé back, for spite and for public relations purposes. They hatch a kidnapping—little knowing that they run the risk of being terminally infected with niceness.

I haven't read *Giras* or *The Glass to Women's Country*, and therefore I can't comment on the mixed reactions to Tepper's overtly feminist stories. The society of Hobbs Land, which is matrilineal, not matriarchal, appears to propose a very modest reversal of roles. Just as in the real life longhouse, "uncle" replaces "father." There's no marked diminution of male predominance in traditional male-dominated areas. In politics, in children's games, in sexual approaches, the boys still take the initiative; the girls still manipulate and nurture. The diminution (and in the actual incidents of the Hobbs narrative, it is not insistent) is in the perceived importance of masculine activities. However, although the plot sets an ideal of natural sexual harmony against an evil of brutal men and victimised women, the authorial voice seems to favour the modern All Men Are Pigs hypothesis (aka postfeminism), above the wimpy postgenderism of my own distant era of feminist sf. A suite of responses—aggression, possessive love, self-obsession—is defined as masculine. The unmanagable stud, slave of the Preadian Father/Son complex, is presented as the root of all human evil. To be masculine, if you insist on being so and won't accept civilized restraints, is necessarily to be BAD. This is a view not at all dissimilar to the judgment of Islam *et al* on the female of the species. But though interested in issues, Tepper does not go chasing after implications: *Raising the Stones* will not examine that troubling coincidence.

Prescriptive writing leads to disjoints in characterisation. On the governmental moons and in Phansure (the developed-world power that shares frontiers with Vornost), bourgeois individualism is allowed to flourish. But that only accounts for a small part of the action. Long before the "God That Works" gets at them, the inhabitants of Hobbs Land are all behaving like the cat of Sesame Street. The community's wide tolerance easily embraces sarcasm, manic depression; even the odd brutal murderer is regarded with kindly good humour. Meanwhile the male Vornosters literally don't do anything but sit around snarling at each other in dirty hells. But the disjoints is most marked in the pivotal male/female characters, mother and son. The crude expression of young Sam Giras's obsession with the Absent Father runs clean contrary to his mature and decent behaviour as "Topman" of the settlement. It becomes more and more difficult to square his abject masculine urges with his position in this ideal community. His mother, Mairé the Singer—battered wife, guilt-ridden victim—ought to be the centre of the book. But her strictly defined place in the scheme of things robs her of human resource, of energy, of identity; and she remains little more than a walking open wound. Inevitably the evil Father, whose role is to represent the abuse of power, is more powerful than either. He's also, which seems unfortunate, far more alive. It looks as if Tepper, finding it difficult to imagine what goes on in the mind of a self-satisfied psychopath, actually put some effort into trying to work it out—while the good people didn't get the same level of attention. It's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease, as they say.

This is not a book that has been subjected to mathematical proof. Obvious caesurae in the narrative are frequently hauled together by rough and ready means. People become possessed of vital information by

sudden sleights of authorial hindsight. The question of the "God That Works"'s sentence is never cleared up. But when the plot has thickened and the author urgently needs to explain what's going on, "God" acquires an omniscient oracle—a young girl who suddenly uses a diction quite foreign to her and to anyone else in the book.

We learn quite soon that the "God That Works" is actually a symbiotic fungus, with weird and unlimited powers. It does whatever is necessary to maintain the physical and spiritual comfort of the host race: takes over minds, rearranges geography, recreates lost forms of animal life. If this was an episode of *Star Trek*, the progress of the infection would be viewed with alarm. All these happy, well-adjusted people would make a great first impression, but it would gradually dawn on the away team that they were dealing with *Zombias of the Mudroom*. What price peace at such a price? It is one of the curiosities of the novel that this view of things is completely suppressed. Instead, the plot places the nurturing "God That Works" in opposition to the destructive God of Voorstod. The fungus is presumably a metaphor for female power: all-pervasive and gently, inexorably effective. But this role, reasonable enough for the prescriptive purpose, leaves problems for the realistic narrative. What exactly has the human-settled system taken on, in accepting this freakish all-powerful commensal? The question "What is (a) God?" is consigned early on to the limbo of academia, and permanently shelved there.

As the story moves to its complicated climax, the Godstuff is certainly the most benign of the powers unleashed. The "developed world," midway between Voorstod and the ideal of Hobbs Land, contributes some horribly bungled organized violence; and of course that fathomless stupidity of an Ultimate Weapon gets loose. This novel is not one of those peace-tract tracts rash enough to dispense with major bloodshed altogether. But by the end, the problem of Voorstod is gone.

And there'll be no recriminations. Sam, the Male who Learns His Lesson, has finally given up the bad dream of macho culture.

*Raising the Stones* raises contemporary issues. But the fundamentalism in this far-future social laboratory is an artificially isolated phenomenon, safely removed from the lives of Tepper's likely readers. The Voorstod culture has a distinctly Islamic, not a Christian slant. And there is no sign of the economic basis that generally fuels racist/sectarian savagery here on earth. The Voorstoders just appeared one day, through one of the instantaneous travel "Gates." No web of shameful interdependence connects their evil with the rest of the system. The baddies are purely MEAN AND NASTY. Nobody else is implicated. The same goes for the GOOD end of the spectrum. Tepper will not tackle the intrinsically transient nature of her idyllic frontier setup on Hobbs Land. On a grimmer note, in this laboratory there is no room for questions that don't have answers, evils that can't be uprooted without worse evil. The final solution to the Voorstod problem works very well, and leaves the goodies' hands pretty clean. But it's genocide, all the same.

I suspect there is no way to raise the issues, seriously, without raising the whole world that goes with them. A fantastic fiction writer might well be better off contemplating the Nature of the Good, in a far-future laboratory, rather than trying to find a solution to sectarian violence. If this is "social sf," it's the Hollywood version, general release. You can take this book into your homes, leave it around for the kids. It won't go changing your life; it won't bite. But I'm not, repeat not complaining. Compared with most of the stuff that comes out of sf's Hollywood, Shen Tepper makes a refreshing change. *Raising the Stones* is a rich entertainment: sprawling, inventive, careless, and lively. The only thing it lacks, if it is a lack, is the bitter and complex aftertaste of truth.

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## Greg Cox Excerpts from *The Transylvanian Library: A Consumer's Guide to Vampire Fiction*

DELANY, SAMUEL R. (and JAMES SALLIS)

"They Fly at Ciron" (*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, June 1971: 29 pp.)

"A head shorter than the Cironian, the creature was nearly twice as broad in the chest, with squat, thick legs. The long prehensile feet had developed an opposable toe. The arms were triple Rahm's in length, with sinuous muscles from which a leathery membrane folded down over three fingers longer than a man's arm. At the point of the wings were an elongated free thumb and forefinger."

Although batlike in aspect, this Winged One, along with the rest of its race, turns out to be a basically benevolent creature with a surprisingly mundane diet: meat, fruit, and wine. "They Fly at Ciron" may be basically a sword-and-sorcery story, complete with a barbarian warrior of sorts, but for once, the bat-people are not the bad guys; that title belongs to the soldiers of a despotic empire intent on subjugating the simple, peaceful people of Ciron. Indeed, it is the dreaded Winged Ones who ultimately rescue the Cironians from the invaders, albeit at some cost to the human hero's pacifistic principles.

Obviously, "They Fly at Ciron" is a vampire story only by the most generous definition. As heroic fantasies go, however, it's an unusually thoughtful example of the genre.



HUGHES, WILLIAM

*Lost for a Vampire* (Beagle, 1971: 159 pp.)

In 1871, J. Sheridan Le Fanu introduced a raven-haired vampire, Countess Miracal Karnstein, who returned to earth under the alias of "Carmilla." A century later, in the Hammer Film on which this novel was based, Carmilla is a blonde who goes by the name of Miracal.

Screenwriters can be really perverse, you know?

Anyway, Miracal/Carmilla is herein resurrected by her equally Undead parents, who then immediately enroll her in an exclusive finishing school. An unwise move on mommy and daddy's part since, as anyone familiar with the character knows, throwing Carmilla into the middle of an all-girl academy is not unlike sheltering a pyromaniac in a fireworks factory. By the end of one week, the body count rises high enough to attract the attentions of the police, the local clergy, and just about everyone else. Carmilla perishes shortly thereafter, a victim of both a wooden beam and her own imprudent appetite.

The poor girl obviously needed a little subtlety more than she did a classical education.

Movie novelizations are not usually outstanding, but this paperback is adequately written. The main problem is the pacing; the story begins briskly, slows to a crawl in the middle then explodes with a flurry of activity (and previously unseen characters) in the last few chapters. In addition, the fiery conflagration that provides the climax is undercut somewhat by the fact that Carmilla and family are explicitly shown to be immune to sunlight and flames.

If I lived in Seyria, I would hang on to my garlic. And watch out for anyone named Miracal, or Millarca, or...



PARRY, MICHAEL

*Countess Dracula* (Beagle, 1971: 140 pp.)

A novel based on Hammer Film's fictionalized account of Elizabeth Bathory's life and crimes, written by an author who would later edit a 1978 vampire anthology titled *The Rivals of Dracula*. Strangely appropriate, eh?

Unlike the historical Blood Countess this Elizabeth is a very old

Read This  
Recently read and Recommended by Michael Kandel:

**Baltasar and Blimunda** by José Saramago (translated by Giovanni Pontiero; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987; also in paperback, I forgot with company). The original Portuguese title is literally something like "Memoirs from a Convent." A strange, rambling, poetic, beautiful, exciting book. Magic, socialism, philosophy, sex, irreverent history. Set in 18th-century Portugal. Ex-soldier Baltasar has one hand; Blimunda, daughter of a Jewish witch, can see inside people when she fasts, can see their souls; and Father Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão, a real person (from Brazil), designs a flying machine called the Passarela and which is powered by ether, magnetism, and Domenico Scarlatti's harpsichord music (played by the composer himself). The machine works, Baltasar and Blimunda take it up, and the passages of flight are wonderful and memorable. (Peculiar footnote: an Italian opera has been based on this book. *Blimunda* premiered half a year ago at La Scala.)

For seasoned Saramago readers, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (also translated by Pontiero, same publisher 1990; no paperback yet). An atmospheric, slow-paced ghost-

and-love story, sort of, that you can't get out of your head. Set in Lisbon, 1936. Reis walks the rain-soaked streets, a lonely physician and poet who has a serious identity problem in that he is actually not real but a fictional character, the invention of the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (who is real but recently deceased). The two have some wonderful conversations at night, about life and death. You almost feel that the author has actually been on the other side.

The next and third novel, *The Stone Raft*, probably won't be out for another year. I haven't read it yet. All I know at present is the title, which promises much. I understand that this book too is a fantasy and one of Saramago's best. The author, though in his seventies now, is still going strong, producing one thick novel after another. A few, so I'm told, are strangely realistic rewrites of the New Testament.

José Saramago is unlike any writer I have ever read. A master stylist who is also very human. A political historian who is also full of music and fun. A man with a genuinely otherworldly mind who at the same time is close to the earth and has the common touch.

woman when she discovers that the blood of virgins, applied externally, is capable of restoring her youthful beauty. Soon she is impersonating her own daughter and blissfully romancing a young soldier. Sadly, the restorative effects of her bloodbaths are only temporary, forcing the Countess and her retainers to murder again and again, leading (as in real life) to the exposure and ruin of all concerned.

The major conceit here is that Elizabeth's gory cosmetics actually worked. (At least one *saw* this is a departure from reality!) It remains unclear, however, whether the Bathory treatment would work on anyone, or only direct blood relatives of Dracula himself.

*Countess Dracula*, both book and movie, benefit from a meaty storyline that echoes both *Macbeth* and Haggard's *She*. Despite her ruthlessness, Elizabeth emerges as a figure of pathos, a semi-Reluctant Vampire addicted only to beauty, as opposed to blood.

In the film, directed by Peter Sarsy, the Countess was played by Ingrid Pitt, who has also starred in adaptations of "Carmilla" and "The Clock."



RUDORFF, RAYMOND

*The Dracula Archives* (Arbor House, 1971: 108 pp.)

The archives in question are collected documents relating to the life and ultimate Undeath of Stephen Worheim. "Stephen who?" you say. Well, perhaps you know him by the name he later assumed: Dracula.

Actually Rudorff is just one of many authors who have provided the Count with the origin story Bram Stoker so thoughtlessly denied him. How did Dracula become a vampire? If this question interests you, Rudorff has the answer. As KIMBERLY, LORT, MONETTE, SABERHAGEN, and TREYMAINE.

Unlike such later accounts, Rudorff's version begins only a few decades before the events of *Dracula*, when a trio of reckless students accidentally unleash the ghost of Elizabeth Bathory. The Blood

Countess's subsequent possession of Adelaide Worheim is short-lived, but before Adelaide ends up with a stake of hawthorn in her heart, she plants some very strange ideas in the head of her only child, Stephen. Ideas of death and blood and immortality.

Years later, after Stephen's ruthless quest for occult knowledge has left behind a trail of victims, it is Professor Arminius (briefly referred to in *Dracula* as a colleague of Van Helsing) who discovers that Stephen Worheim is a true descendent of both the Bathories and the Draculas, and maybe even the reincarnation of Vlad the Impaler. Still, throughout the novel, Stephen remains only a human monster—until, at least, he comes to a certain old castle in the Carpathians.

The history here is a bit careless (the Impaler is incorrectly identified as Vlad *Dracul*) but the book itself is good, spooky fun. Rudorff successfully captures the style of Stoker and unfolds his complicated plot in an entertaining fashion.

The scariest part, however, is the paperback binding which labels *The Dracula Archives* as "Non-Fiction."

A mistake?



AICKMAN, ROBERT

"Pages from a Young Girl's Journal" (*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, February 1973: 32 pp.)

This story won the first World Fantasy Award for short fiction, which only proves that the judges had a weakness for an old-fashioned vampire story told in an old-fashioned style.

Style alone, in fact, saves this familiar story of a young girl seduced and transformed by a darkly handsome vampire. The prose is elegant, the portrait of the poor excitable girl is incisive, and transition from normalcy is slow and subtle.

Still in all, this is just "Carmilla" without the climactic staking.



LORY, ROBERT

- Dracula Returns* (Pinnacle, 1973: 189 pp.)  
*The Hand of Dracula* (1973: 189 pp.)  
*Dracula's Brothers* (1973: 186 pp.)  
*Dracula's Gold* (1973: 182 pp.)  
*The Witching of Dracula* (1974: 177 pp.)  
*The Drums of Dracula* (1974: 189 pp.)  
*Dracula's Lost World* (1974: 181 pp.)  
*Dracula's Disciple* (1975: 181 pp.)  
*Challenge to Dracula* (1975 pp.)

The nine titles above comprise the so-called "Dracula Horror Series," a string of pulp adventures featuring the modern-day adventures of the King of the Vampires.

The basic situation is this: the brilliant-but-crippled Professor Damien Harmon and his huge assistant Cameron Sanchez, both ex-cops, raise Dracula from the dead and bring him to America. By implanting a miniature, remote-controlled "stake" in Dracula's chest, they manage to control the uncooperative vampire and force him to battle crime on their behalf.

In other words, Dracula vs. the Mafia.

It is an uneasy arrangement. The Count makes no secret of his desire to turn the tables the first time he gets a chance, thereby maintaining a healthy degree of suspense.

Other continuing characters include the cat-woman Ktara, a beautiful sorceress of uncertain loyalties; and Jenny Harmon, the professor's virginal niece, who remains such throughout all nine books despite periodic brushes with fates worse than death.

Over the course of the series, this motley assortment of adventurers take on menaces as diverse as gangsters, zombies, maddened cultists, killer bats, wizards, demons, and even the Blood Countess herself.

In addition, an interesting version of Dracula is slowly revealed. According to Lory, the Count is far more than just a transformed Wallachian warlord; he is an immortal survivor of ancient Atlantis (as is

Ktara) and a powerful magician fighting a complicated, eons-long war against some mysterious "Old Gods." Lory never provides a full account of Dracula's past, but keeps dealing out tantalizing new hints and clues. The last few books, in particular, seem to be leading up to some sort of Final Battle between Dracula and his inhuman foes, but apparently that story was never published.

Just the same, the speculative jigsaw-puzzle of Lory's Dracula legend is probably the best aspect of the series.

As for the rest of it—well, Marvel Comics scribe Chris Claremont once described the books as "consummate dreck." That may be a bit too harsh.

On the plus side, as mentioned, there are enough good subplots running to keep the curious reader or coming back: when will Dracula turn on the good guys? who are the Old Gods and when will they return? and just whose side is the cat-lady on anyway?

On the negative side, the prose is crude and repetitive. Even more disturbing, there is frequently distasteful emphasis on sex and sadism. The recurring abductions and near-rape of Jenny Harmon, for example. Granted, I'm not sure how to distinguish between classy erotica (*The Vampires*, "My Dear Emily") and gratuitous titillation, but the effect is not the same.

Of the series, the best is *The Witching of Dracula*, in which Dracula confronts another enemy from his past: Elizabeth Bathory, here portrayed as a psychic vampiress, feeding on the thoughts of others. Like Dracula, Countess Bathory has been around for a long time. She is identified as the mythical Cerce, and Lilith.

The focus of *Witching* is on history and magic. The fun stuff.

In contrast, the worst of the lot must be the second and longest book, *The Hand of Dracula*, in which Dracula meets not only a Manson-style cult leader but also a necrophiliac undertaker with a taste for dead hookers. Ugh!

Still, all in all, and for the sake of my ego since I did buy every book, the "Dracula Horror Series" is rated. . . .



## Work in Progress

A Bibliographic Checklist of First Editions, by L. W. Currey

Draft: Revised 2/91

### IAIN BANKS

b. 1954

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CLEANING UP. [Birmingham]: B[irmingham] S[cience] F[iction] G[rup], [1987].

Wrappers. 500 numbered copies signed by Banks.

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# Screed (letters of comment)

Ted Chiang, Redmond, Washington

An article that I found interesting was Dan Simmons's speech, "Childhood's End." I agree with some of Charles Platt's responses in issue #35. I too was surprised at the omissions in Simmons' list of sf's interesting stylists; no mention of Delany, Wolfe, or Crowley?

Like Platt, I also hold the opinion that Simmons' own work doesn't demonstrate the qualities he advocates. Everyone I've talked to about his novels agrees with me that he's a very good commercial writer, but not a literary one. In fact, when Simmons lists some of the requirements of the new sf, he clearly disqualifies his two sf novels, each on several counts. Two examples: he says that writers must cease writing novels that require years of reading sf in order to appreciate; this would exclude *Hyperion*. He also says that writers must strive to avoid the falsely melodramatic and the weakly contrived; this would exclude *Fall of Hyperion*.

Admittedly, the fact that Simmons' own work doesn't exemplify the new sf he describes is to some degree irrelevant; his proposed goal remains desirable nonetheless. However, his argument would be more effective if he led by example, or alternatively, offered some practical suggestions for realizing that goal. Is his speech designed to inspire writers to improve their writing? If so, that's not enough, because most publishers wouldn't know what to do with the resulting novels, since they have no way of targeting the readers who would appreciate it.

This ties in to the only one of Simmons' suggestions that verges on the practical: that of widening the gap between sf and sci-fi. What is needed is a new marketing category for literary sf. The mainstream places John Updike and Toni Morrison in a different category from Robert Ludlum and Danielle Steele, and markets them accordingly. Science fiction needs to be able to do the same. (Alexei Panshin discusses something similar to this in issue #35.)

However, writers cannot create this category on their own. It requires the participation of publishers, who would have to make a sharp break from their current practice of buying imitations of earlier popular novels and marketing them to an adolescent audience. In order for publishers to support such an effort, they would have to be convinced that there exist sufficient readers who would buy sf with top-notch literary values. And this is perhaps something that Simmons could actually do something about. Given his popularity, he has the clout needed to influence publishers; he is in a position to help create a new category of literary sf. What he has to do is write some.

Ray Davis, San Francisco, California

I'm not given to complain about manifestos, particularly those which call for better writing, but silence falls me before Dan Simmons' "Childhood's End" (NYRSF #34). To use his historical analogy, he's an 1820s Virginian suggesting that England rethink our taxes. The revolution he calls for has happened, is happening as much as it can happen (there being only so many great writers and brave publishers to go around). I concur with his hopes for the future but a science fiction writer, of all people, should realize that the future is now.

I read sf for one reason alone: it's where worthwhile new American and English fiction is most easily found. At the confluence of realistic techniques and the fantastic, it simply has access to more resources than does the runoff ditch it calls the mainstream. It's true that most writers and readers don't profit enough from this wealth, but what else is new? Outnumbering good stuff is what mediocrity is all about.

It's also true that sf writers don't get the serious academic or journalistic attention that mainstream (defined, I suppose, as that which gets attention from academics and journalists) writers do. Neither do most interesting poets, musicians, and filmmakers; during the heights of their careers, neither did Henry James or James Joyce; neither did virtually any women until recently. I'm afraid we have to

work under the assumption that such attention tells us more about the industries of academia and journalism than about the art they choose to inspect.

Simmons quotes John Updike's equation of major work with what reviewers usually call "characterization." Applied impartially, this criterion labels not only sf, but non-European writing and pre-19th-century writing, as "minor genres." Even in the 19th century, who meets Updike's standard? Not Flaubert, with his obsessive research and every-other-novel experimentation with deliberate flatness. Not Dickens (David Copperfield is no Rabbit when it comes to "details of behavior"), nor James (we see too narrow a range of his heroes' lives in those late spider web soufflés). Charlotte Brontë is the nearest match I can think of, if one excludes the historical novel *Shirley* and her shared-world fantasy juvenilia. Prospects are even slimmer among the Modernists, what with Joyce's gargantuan clichés, Barnes's free-floating discourse, and Beckett's utterly characterless narrators. Let's face it, literature on these terms begins and ends with the New Yorker. (To be fair, the best fiction I've read recently is Louis Zukofsky's impeccably New Yorkerish (although naturally not published there) 1942 novella, "Ferdinand," but such treats are rare.)

In short, Updike has defined literary value in terms of his own practice. Understandable in such a dedicated artisan, but not necessarily the best rule for the rest of us to follow.

From Simmons' list of "recent" mainstream names, only Nabokov and Morrison seem of more lasting interest than, say, William Dean Howells. To use Simmons's and-in-THIS-corner approach, Joanne Russ hasn't yet buckled any peaks as high as *The Gift* or *Lolita*, but her range is more consistently interesting than Nabokov's. Gene Wolfe is sneakier and more truly vicious than the large school of misogynic melancholophiles in the mainstream. And Samuel R. Delany is worth more than his weight in Updikes and Cheevers.

The absence of Delany from the Simmons list is particularly strange since *Dhalgren*, *Triton*, and *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand* are all sustained, complexly characterized, stylistically audacious works. Even more to Simmons's point, *Triton* is downright Jamesian science fiction and *Dhalgren* features a memorable movie marquee. (Although Updike's marquee is funnier. To find risible equivalents in sf, one might have to search as far afield as Disch or Waldrop or Lansdale or Blisson.)

Well, if nothing else, this helps me understand the fireworks *Science Fiction Eye's* Clarion-blast started off. There must be better ways of advancing the art than attacking or ignoring the advances already made. Personally, I'm going to try celebrating Independence Day now.

Gregory Benford, Laguna Beach, California

Dan Simmons' call to higher stylistic heights, while familiar, echoes Updike's review in *The New Yorker* and that oblique reading of Aristotle. Updike solemnly reminded us that Aristotle ranked Spectacle last in the list of components of poetic representation. Ergo, sf is lesser.

But Aristotle's ranked list is Plot, Character, Style, Spectacle. Updike's own work, and much of modern lit-biz, plainly values (and is best at) Style, Character, Plot—in that order—with damn little Spectacle at all.

Like Updike's work but here he merely uses Aristotle as a handy stick; he doesn't believe this scheme for a moment. I wonder if Simmons does either.

Yet I do, in part, for the great strength of genre fiction generally is its understanding that plot is for many readers primary. It's a truism that plotting is the toughest job in fiction, the hardest to teach. No accident, then, that Updike still hasn't learned it well.

Dan Simmons brings up the gritty detail available to "realistic" writers like Updike, seems to deplore Silverberg's finding this an easy

part of *Dying Inside*, but never confronts the tension between such methods and fantastic literature. After all, the Updike paragraph he quotes is basically reportage, not imaginative, and not all that hard to do. Imagination is tough, hard work, if it goes beyond the rearranging of genre tropes, and Simmons seems to weight it little, alas.

#### Lee Bailentine, Ocean View, California

Dan Simmons' analysis of science fiction's roots in Robert Louis Stevenson (*NYRFS* #34) and its prospects for the future makes interesting reading. His exposition of Updike on science fiction's limitations ("so busy inventing the environment that little energy is left to be invested in human subtleties") is compelling.

If literary science fiction has reached the end of adolescence and must now face up to adult responsibilities, and distance itself from "lazy work and derivative work and formula work," all of which are endemic in contemporary sf, one wonders just where the energy will come from to overcome what I would like to call the Updike Threshold.

Simmons proposes that this creative deficit can be made up out of the assets of Realism. He sums up as a "long spell of black and white humorlessness" much of 20th century literature, singling out as specific targets "surreal fiction," "post-modernist 'metalfiction'" and "literary experiments" generally.

Simmons himself, as a prose stylist, makes effective use of classical approaches and structures; his Chaucerian *Hyperion* is an example. As an aside, some of his big guns of the mainstream (notably Faulkner) were prone to experiment, sometimes in a big way (I'm thinking of *As I Lay Dying*).

But an increase in the Realism quotient on the other side of the sf/mainstream boundary is unlikely to help science fiction bridge the Updike Threshold.

To begin with, there is the diffusion of narrative media to consider. Fiction serves a different purpose today than it did during Henry James' decline in publishing fortunes at the end of the last century.

Nietzsche argued that music became decadent when the Greeks allowed it to diverge from drama—when in effect the chorus got fed up with the choir director and found in its ranks a bandleader to get it some other gigs.

In similar fashion, the entertainment options of the late 19th century were relatively limited, even for those in the privileged classes. Public executions had largely moved behind prison walls, leaving as options: family hymn singing, parlour games, the afternoon promenade, and reading Henry James (or more likely, as Simmons points out, Stevenson).

For imagination, humor, excitement, and intellectual refinement, the citizen with time on his hands had two kinds of home entertainment to help dispose of it. (1) Reading. (2) Talking about books.

One by one in the 20th century, the human qualities exercised in reading have followed the lead of the Greek chorus and walked off the stage of literature. Today we have Blockbuster Videos for imagination, television news for humor, praying mantis combat on PBS for excitement, and for intellectual pursuits: Game Boy, role playing, and for the daring, Lotus 1-2-3. Leaving in sole possession of the grassy amphitheater that now-decadent institution, the novel.

It might be argued that when its primacy as entertainment passed, the energy left to literature as a whole was diminished, leaving too little for any writer, however gifted as a Realist, to bridge the Updike Threshold.

Any renewed interest in fiction is interesting, and there can be no doubt of the recent rise in critical acceptance of Realist (or descriptive) fiction. To the strong New Yorker talents Simmons singles out can be added Laurie Colwin (did anyone else read her gender-bender story "My Mistress" published in *Penthouse* a few years ago?) and even V.S. Naipaul.

But those of us interested in science fiction ought not to dismiss the balance of 20th century literature quite so readily. The John Gardner-Raymond Carver axis has much to recommend it as an antidote to the grasping, phony in-group criticism Simmons objects

to, but it is still largely a white, male, North American, English-speaking minority literature.

One way to bootstrap the Updike Threshold is Simmons' own way, clear in *Hyperion*. Instead of expending energy creating and sustaining a new world, he's given us characters in an amalgamation of familiar science fiction world tropes and spent his considerable narrative powers on the characters themselves.

But this is not a formula for success by lesser talents. In fact, it's rarer and rarer that any science fiction world shows evidence of the new. Science fiction publishing, like romance publishing, has long relied on our inability to recognize an old amazing story dressed up in a new cover.

It seems more likely to me that science fiction's leap over the ghetto wall will never come.

Or if it does come, those who would have cared will be beyond noticing, having moved that much farther into a broadband science fiction entertainment reality.

Or if there is someone to notice—a core of literary diehards who read the surviving magazines, prowl the few universities that will retain their walls, or languish in the tattered narrow-band communications backwaters of a new "third world," they're likely to see a novelist emerge who owes as much to Gabriel García Márquez as to Robert Heinlein and Raymond Carver.

#### Robert A. Collins, Boca Raton, Florida

What a stroke of genius, pairing Clute and Panshin on the cover of #35! I don't know when I've been more entertained, and provoked of course, Clute's exhilarating brand of nastiness has had me dancing a jig all morning.

He's right about "literary Whiggery," but I am puzzled about one part of his pose, his claim that he can't share the Panshins' book with his peers because "they would not understand" its "appalling provinciality." Whiggery, as Butterfield and Clute define it, pervades almost everything American, including academe. Do such enlightened peers exist only in Britain?

I wish I could lure Clute into examining the curricular proscriptions of the so-called "Politically Correct" establishment in American letters. One PC apologist recently told me, for example, that Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and company are "grossly inappropriate" studies for a properly "sensitive" English curriculum. From her point of view, no academic syllabus that fails to contribute directly to the cultural status of women, blacks and gays can be acceptable. The king-pins of the canon, all male chauvinists, must therefore be suppressed in favor of authors whose gender, race and sexual preference enhance the self-image of "minorities" among the students. Surely this is a bizarre form of literary Whiggery which puts the self-congratulation of the sf fanatic in the shade?

Literary Whiggery is ancient and probably universal. Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, for example, reflected the conventional wisdom of his age in treating the whole of Western philosophy and history in terms of the "precursors" of Christ and Christian dogma. My students find this quaint, but they all commit precisely similar sins of chauvinism. Even histories of science, all of them organized on the "progress" principle, do the same thing, treating every "pioneer" in terms of the one "contribution" currently recognized as respectable and important, and excising every other often embarrassing aspect of the "pioneer's" thought. (We seldom read about Kepler's fixation on astrology, or Newton's fascination with alchemy.) In fact, I cannot think of any history of anything that does not exhibit the "Whig fallacy" in some form.

So where are these peers who "would not understand"? Clute's rhetorical pose is, however unfortunately, empty of reference. We're all Whigs.

#### Damian Kilby, Killingworth, Connecticut

Panshin's "What's Wrong With SF?" article was ridiculously negative: an excuse to wimp out and give up! There's more than just Rumanians to write for. And there's still plenty of unique, interesting new sf and fantasy out there to be found. Magazines like *Asimov's*

Fantasy and Science Fiction, and Interzone are still being published (possibly you don't like their choice in fiction, but you can't say it's chosen as purely commercial product). I know I've got a backlog of good, recent books on my shelf to be read (Bear's Queen of Angels, Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, Sterling's *Cyber Express*, etc., etc.). Good, honest work is out there—maybe it doesn't make as much money, maybe it's not the center of the public's perception of Science Fiction, but what do you expect? It's out there. And magazines like *NYRSF* exist to help us find it. (How many really good books can we expect to find in any given year, anyway, in any genre?)

Maybe people like Alexei Panshin just want everything to be the way it was in the days when they really loved science fiction. It's easy enough to say "nothing's original anymore." I only know that I get more of a thrill when I discover stories like "R+R" by Shepard or "A Short, Sharp Shock" by Robinson, than when reading reprints of 40's and 50's classics (though some of them do give me a thrill), no matter how much I appreciate their significance.

Panshin, in his examples of the old days, uses Asimov and Charles Harness. Yet Harness was writing "some sf on the side," and Asimov was making a living from science writing. At the time, they didn't have the choice to write sf to make a good living. The difference now seems to be that you can make the choice to make a living at writing hard sf, whereas before the only choice you had was to make your living outside the field. . . . But the existence of the commercial potential hasn't appeared to completely exclude the publication of more seriously intended work (more of it than I have time to read).

So: horror of horrors, writing is tough! Society owes true artists a living but doesn't pay up!

Come on, let your Golden Age rest and do what you have to do now.

David Bratman, San Jose, California

John Clute says "it would be terribly unfair to forget to say something positive about *The World Beyond the Hill*," and he does say some kind things, but manages to be terribly unfair anyway. As he observes in the final column of his review, the bulk of the text is devoted to practical criticism of major Golden Age authors, but the bulk of the review is devoted to criticizing what is essentially an overblown preface.

As I read *The World Beyond the Hill*, the analysis of Asimov, Van Vogt, et al., is the heart, as well as the most interesting part, of the book. The first 200 pages are intended to set the scene, to explain the context in which those authors wrote. In such a case, a Whig interpretation of history is the appropriate angle. The pre-Doc Smith authors are only here for their significance in light of their successors. They're not being studied for their own sake; that's a different book.

No "science fiction" author before Verne and Wells, so far as I know, nor quite a few afterwards, was consciously writing "science fiction," as a specific genre of literature. So any attempt to discuss them as sf authors is anachronistic, pigeonholing them into categories they knew nothing about. In a word, Whiggish. But sometimes it's appropriate.

There are certainly problems with *The World*. The first two parts, to which Clute's complaints are directed, could have been cut significantly to no detriment. I got tired of the many sentences beginning with "What" and ending with exclamation marks (e.g. "What courage!" "What a wonderful coincidence we have here!"). I found the geography of the titular metaphor totally confusing, feeling at times as if I was up a bad fantasy novel without a map. And I doubt if the proto-sf authors were shying away from transcendence quite as blatantly as the Panshins claim.

I suspect this last point is the substance of Clute's complaint. The search for transcendence may not be the truth, and it's certainly not the whole truth, about these authors, but it's a good enough theory to be worth arguing for. Here's the argument, all 685 pages of it.

Meanwhile, in the next column over, Alexei Panshin himself does a good job of reiterating the standard argument that publishing practices are killing sf. He touches on, but doesn't discuss, a significant factor in the authors' behavior: their employment status.

Charles Harness could spend two years on *The Paradox Men* because he had a good job as a patent attorney, one which probably left him with little time to write anything else. The details of Roger Zelazny's personal finances are not known to me, but I presume he made a decent living at the Social Security Administration, writing his classic short stories and first few novels on the side. His decline only took place after he quit his job to become a full-time writer (in 1968, I believe). Was he dissatisfied with his job? Perhaps. Did he feel he could make more money writing full-time? Probably. Did he have more to say than he'd had time to write? Apparently not.

Brian Stableford, Reading, England

Who would dare to argue that today's editors are devoid of inspiration, having borne witness to the merciless fashion in which youan Alexei Panshin's heartfelt lament ("What's Wrong with SF?" *NYRSF* #35) alongside John Clute's review of *The World Beyond the Hill*, thus fitting the Jeremiah with an argumentative key capable of pulling it apart? I, for one, am grateful; the juxtaposition has served to clarify in my mind something which I surely always knew at some subconscious level but had never quite contrived to raise to the level of articulation: that Whig theories of history can work in two different directions, and that the Whiggish notion of history as glorious progress towards a single magic moment in time is precisely mirrored by a notion of history as tragic decay from such a magic moment.

As Clute scathingly reveals, the Panshins see the history of sf before 1945 as a laborious ascent to a predestined Celestial City, and their sole criterion for evaluating earlier works is the extent to which such works resemble their imagined goal-state. We now also know that Alexei sees the history of sf after 1969 as a sinful fall from that marvellous state of grace, and that his sole criterion for evaluating later works is the extent to which they resemble the products of his supposed Golden Age. The terms which Clute deploys [in] the penultimate paragraph of his review of *The World Beyond the Hill*—cruelly ignorant, spite, faux-naïf contempt, callow—are undoubtedly harsh, but no one reading Alexei's article could possibly argue that they are unjustified. Here again we find Alexei arguing that the community of sf writers was once consciously engaged in "constantly improving and bettering itself, and . . . moving towards an indefinable higher destiny," supplemented by his new revelation that all this has been lost and thrown away; that the ideal has been (literally) betrayed; that the True Faith has been devastated; and that the End of the World is Nigh. It is not entirely surprising to discover a man who thinks that the sacred mission of sf was and is a "Quest for Transcendence" writing in such a Millenarian vein, but it is sad nevertheless.

Like Clute, however, I would like to say something positive about *The World Beyond the Hill*. I read it with great interest, and in spite of the fact that I could not sympathise for a moment with its argument, the sheer weight and conscientious deployment of its evidence changed my mind about a belief I had long held. For many years I had accepted the conventional opinion that John W. Campbell's editorship of *Asiomatic* was, on the whole, a Good Thing—that in spite of a certain unfortunate crankiness which eventually developed regarding a series of intellectual issues (human chauvinism, Dianetics, psi) he did play a vital role in making sf writers think more seriously and more rigorously about the logic of extrapolation and the likely effects of technological progress on future society. The Panshins, in their close study of the development of Campbell's *Asiomatic*, and in particular the contributions made by Heinlein, Van Vogt and Asimov, have convinced me that what was going on was, even then, far more akin to a "Quest for Transcendence." They, of course, approve of this wholeheartedly; but with the best will in the world I cannot. (I have always been a lover of Van Vogtian fantasy, and am willing to defend the thesis that A.E. van Vogt is a fascinating, enjoyable and uniquely talented writer, but what he does has nothing to do with any rigorous logic of extrapolation or any likely effects of technological progress on future society.) Thanks to the Panshins' scrupulous and detailed examination of what was really going on at *Asiomatic* between 1938 and 1945, I now believe that Campbell's influence on the development of modern sf was, on the whole, a Bad Thing. That it was he, and not someone else, who presided over the

supposed sophistication of American sf ensured that said process was infected, at its very inception, with certain kinds of silly and sloppy thinking which it has never entirely shed and unfortunately continues to celebrate.

Although there is nothing much to be said for the kind of pseudo-understanding obtainable via the Whig interpretation of history, its normal manifestations do at least serve the psychological function of maintaining confidence in the present. When such a view is tied not to the present but to a point of past time, it becomes bitter as well as sterile. It hardly needs to be pointed out that Alexei's Golden Age of science fiction is largely a product of his imagination, or at least selective perception. His statement that "SF only existed then as a little side pocket of pulp magazine publishing" is only true if we ignore all the examples of speculative fiction which were not actually labelled "sf." A glance at the relevant chapter of *Anatomy of Wonder* (3rd ed.) or I. F. Clarke's *The Tale of the Future* (2nd ed.) will confirm that this was not so. The 1930s were something of a boom time for British scientific romance, speculative fiction was being produced in some quantity in France and there were other writers, including writers as notable as Karl Capek, active in other European nations. These traditions were temporarily devastated by the economic side-effects of World War II, but their withering thereafter and their displacement by American sf has far more to do with the general neo-colonialization of Europe than with any special virtue possessed by the displacing material.

Perhaps we ought to try to imagine an alternative history in which John W. Campbell had turned out to be an editor of the same stripe as Ray Palmer, so that *Astounding* had remained a clone of *Amazing* or even *Planet Stories*. Is it conceivable that no serious-minded speculative fiction would then have been written, anywhere in the world, after World War II? A likelier scenario is that such work would have been written, perhaps by some of the same people who wrote it for the post-war sf magazines and very probably by others, but that it would not have been marketed under a label for a pre-existent audience of specialist readers; it would have been forced instead to make its way in the general literary marketplace. To a limited extent, that is what happened—and still happens—in Britain, but speculative fiction which actually has real, logically coherent scientific speculation together with the lineal descendants of the Shaver Mystery, Burroughsian interplanetary fiction and costume-drama fantasy; and that—as the Panshins show—is just as much a part of the Campbellian legacy as all the really good sf which the 40s and 50s produced.

What Alexei seems to miss about the current sf scene is the clannishness and cultishness of days when his reading of sf felt like a religious experience. He has lost his illusions, and he blames the fiction he reads (or doesn't bother to read—his article is ambiguous on the point) for being no longer capable of producing such illusions. This failure he blames on the writers rather than himself; he is convinced that they have been spoiled by the commercialization of their field, so that they write for the money and not for the cause. But there are more part-time writers nowadays than there ever were before, more semi-professional outlets, more people who do what they do because they love it. The proportion of serious and intelligent material to literary confectionery is probably much the same as it ever was, but even if it were worse the absolute numbers are so much bigger that there would still be a lot of intelligent material around. It is, of course, difficult to locate the most interesting material within the confusing patchwork and publishing activity, but whatever Alexei may think, it always was—his conviction that all the worthwhile speculative fiction of the 40s was in *Astounding* and all that of the 50s and 60s was in *Galaxy*, *F&SF* and the *Ace* Specials merely reveals that he never did manage to locate the rest and now steadfastly refuses to admit its existence.

Alexei is right, of course, to say that it is hard to publish serious-minded and ideally ambitious sf today. It always has been hard, and the windows of opportunity which *Astounding* and the *Ace* Specials provided was very much narrower than his rose-tinted memories allow him to believe. We live in a world where people who can follow an extrapolative argument, appreciating its beauty and alert to possible flaws, are in a tiny minority. Nevertheless, works of this kind can get published, and a few of them even continue to

become popular. No one could sensibly expect any more; but then, nobody could sensibly write about sf as though it were a kind of organic entity—an itinerant wanderer of the noosphere with a life-history, a secret ambition and a thwarted destiny—as Alexei does when woffling about a Pulp Kid who grew up to be a Heavyweight Pulp Fiction Champion of the World and got corrupted.

Alexei's comment that "the whole universe as envisioned in the Golden Age SF... has become both a scientific and an ontological fossil" makes it clear that what he is really lamenting is the loss of a world-view which can no longer sustain belief; not a lost art but a discredited faith. As Clute points out, the Panshins have always tended to write as if Doc Smith's universe end the other scenarios of ancient sf were actually places, much as Heinlein claims in *The Number of the Beast* and other works of his doty dottage, Alexei now seems to feel that he is unfairly shut out of those places, because today's sf writers don't want to go there, and nasty publishers wouldn't let them even if they did. But it does not do justice to today's writers to say that they are all gutless hacks and incompetent fools because they cannot take readers to the same Enchanted Forests that they loved to visit long ago. Nor could this "problem" be "solved" by Alexei's romantic dream of a "circle of authors and an informed audience and a proper vehicle" coming together to renew the "power" of sf. When a cult's faith decays in the face of common sense, the answer is not to found a new cult; it is to do what one can to get by without that kind of psychological prop.

I hope Alexei does start writing sf again. I also hope that he will forget all about the fruitless Quest for Transcendence, and subject his ideas to intelligent filtration, serious analysis and processes of extrapolation as bold as they are rigorous. He will, of course, have difficulty selling the stuff for more than a handful of beans, but that's life. All the speculative writers of the past had the same problem, and they too had to live with the possibility that they might not get an understanding and sympathetic hearing even from critics and historians.

John J. Pierce, Bloomfield, New Jersey

To clear up any misunderstanding that may have been created by my letter in the May issue, I have learned since I wrote that letter that David Drake's *Surface Action* was originally written to be part of a Tor Double with a reprint of Henry Kuttner's "Clash By Night."

For some reason, having nothing to do with Drake's intentions, his book ended up being published separately, with an afterword that made it appear to be an uncredited pastiche of a specific story. The fact of the matter is that Drake never had any intent to deceive—and in fact wrote his story with the specific purpose of getting the Kuttner story back into print as part of a double. He has written a new Venus story since then to accomplish that end, and by the time this appears the Kuttner-Drake Tor Double will probably be in print, with an introduction by Drake explaining the whole matter.

Since I'm a great admirer of Kuttner, as is Drake, I'm happy to see one of Kuttner's classics back in print, and Drake deserves our appreciation—regardless of what any of us may think of the quality of his work.

## Why Are We? What Were They?

(continued from page 24)

analyzing everything about the magazines being published in the genre at the time, which perhaps clarifies his debt to (and ability to reconceive) the tropes of the Golden Age into such novels as *Dying Inside* and *Downward to the Earth*.

The future belongs to those who—instead of taking Dan Simmons or John Clute or Alexei Panshin or Brian Stableford at their word that the "Golden Age" was an apothecary or an apostasy or only of antiquarian interest—examine the works for themselves. The Golden Age still has lodes to be mined by those willing and able. Much of our best sf was, and still is, written not beneath the level of the mainstream, but in active opposition to canonical literature. And that is our strength—even when it is our own canon to which we must respond.

—Kenneth L. Houghton and the editors



## Why Are We? What Were They?

You will find much discussion in our recent issues—indeed in the field in general—about the “Golden Age of Science Fiction,” now regarded as works primarily published in the 1940s and 50s. Dan Simmons, a writer of some merit, recently suggested that it is time for sf to grow beyond puberty and compete with the grown-ups, the John Updikes and Ann Beatties of the world, on a level field. This situation—which Brian Stableford suggests in his letter is *status quo* in Great Britain—is one he presumes to be a leap forward for American sf. Simmons’s argument is hardly original; variations of it can be found in the field since at least the mid-1960s.

Leaving aside the issue of whether it would indeed be good for the genre to lose its “ghetto” aspect—a proposition of which I am not quite convinced, even if such could be accomplished—Simmons makes assumptions both implicit and explicit about the fallowness of the ground from which sf has grown. The “Golden Age” seems to have become, to most of the writers and many of the readers of today, the equivalent of one’s senescent uncle: to be tolerated only so long as there is a chance of inheritance, preferably stashed in a nearby (or, better, distant) nursing home so the rest of the field can get on with its life. It is quite enough, after all, that we named awards for the magazine publisher who got us started and the editor who, while he may have stayed at the helm too long, skippered the sf Ship of State through increasingly turbulent waters, including some of his own making.

Some of us suggest that, at the very least, Uncle Golden Age might possibly be useful as a navigator between Scylla and Charybdis. The Age’s detractors point to the recent output of “the masters”—which tend to be collaborative novels of dubious auctional input or the old tricks run up the flagpole one more time—as if those current works eclipse, and therefore trivialize, all that came before. Or they point to works which seem only to be others retyping Golden Age stories, complete with spaceships and engineering-supermen: books which are called “new” simply because the author may have been born after Cyril Kornbluth died.

It is not surprising that some, whose recapitulation of sf phylogeny pales before the best of the Golden Age, seek to justify their work by declaring themselves lineal descendants of Heinlein; it is merely a pity. But it is equally shameful when Golden Age detractors point to the misuses, the works which (in Richard Terra’s phrase) “land in the net,” as if they were the original stories. “The Cold Solutions” is no more “The Cold Equations” than *The Sword of Shannara* is *The Lord of the Rings*.

Those least inclined to manifestoes about the need for the genre to “progress”—very much a Golden Age concept—are often the ones who, having read *Adventures in Time and Space* and/or Anthony Boucher’s two-volume *Treasury of Great Science Fiction*, and/or David Hartwell’s *The World Treasury of Science Fiction*, have taken the Golden Age—excesses, sexism, specious plotting, one-dimensional characters, and all—and used it vigorously and creatively in their work, if only to avoid falling into the same traps as Raymond F. Jones, Harry Bates, and Cleve Cartmill. In his biographical essay from *Hell’s Cartographers*, “Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal,” Robert Silverberg describes having spent a year

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